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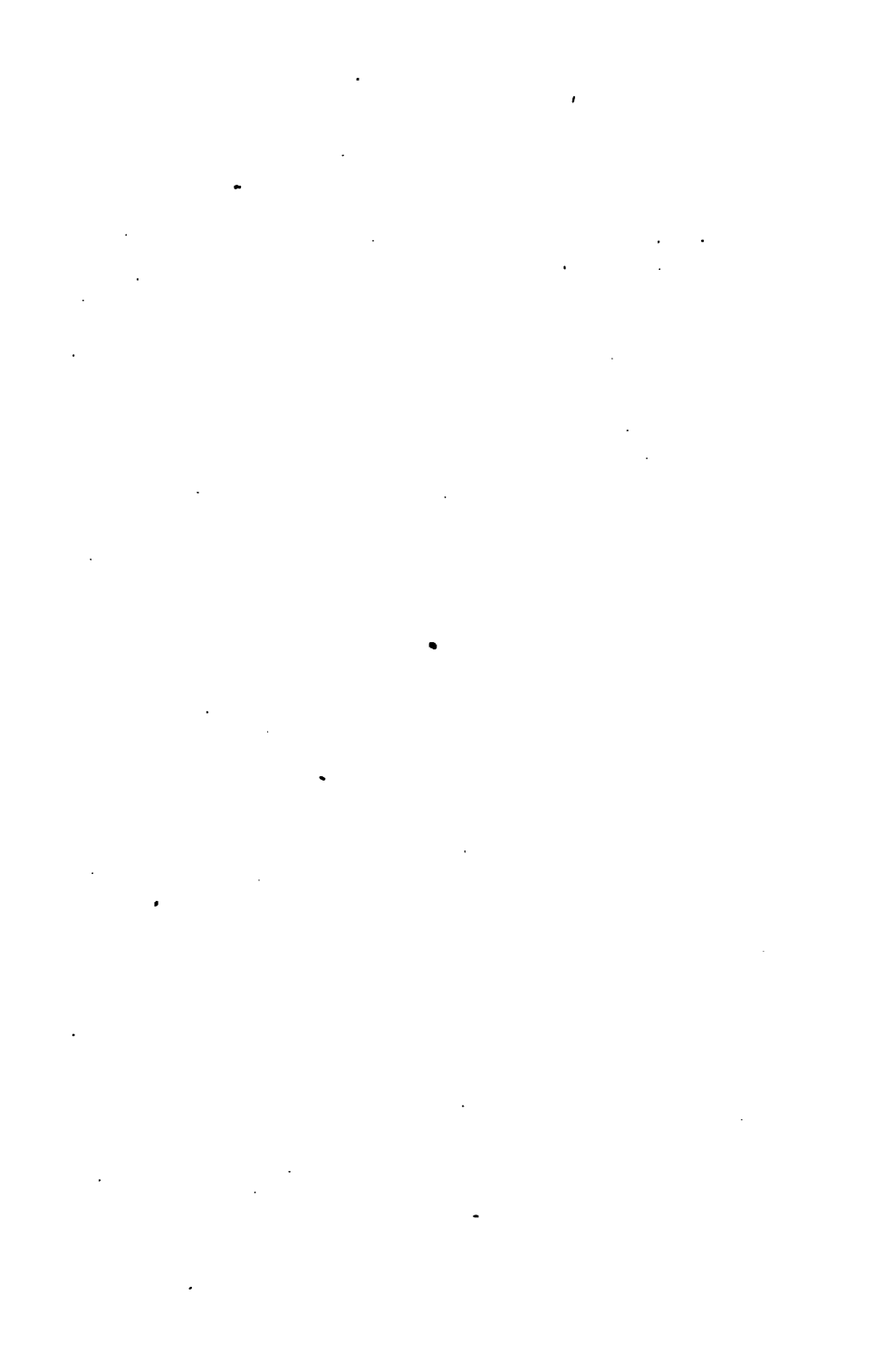
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EXPIATED.

VOL. I.

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EXPIATED.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

“SIX MONTHS HENCE” AND “BEHIND THE VEIL.”

I cannot tell what thoughts they bear
Who gaze on battle's iron brow;
I know not how men frame the prayer,
When gaps their billow-leaguered prow;
But I have seen, in common life,
Such vehemency in heart and brain,
The soul so labouring in its strife,
The muscle plied with such quick pain,
That ye might weave from storm and fray
Less passionate, less strange a lay.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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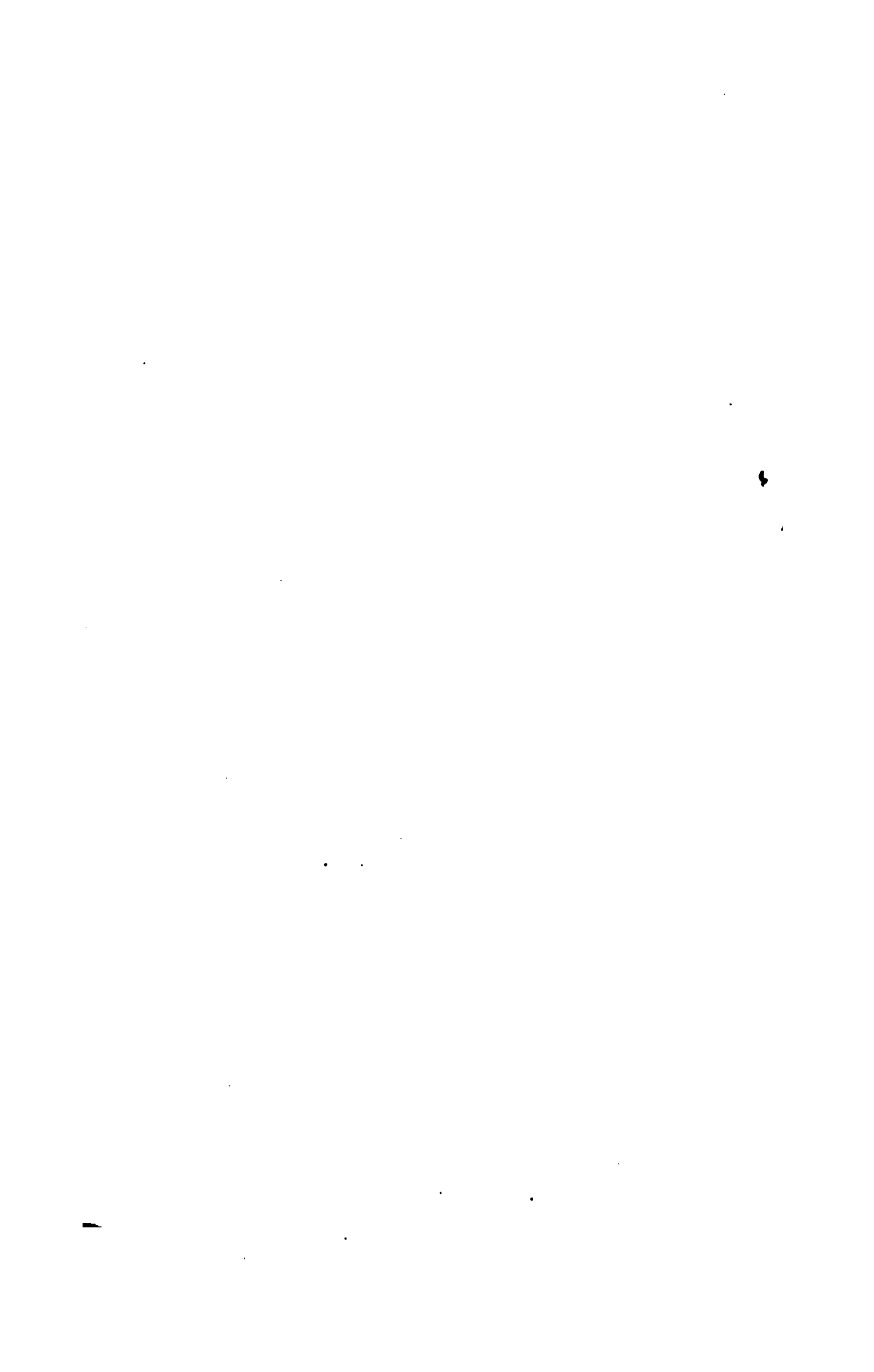
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PREFACE.



THE PRESENT WORK is, and was intended to be, a tragedy, striking the deep notes of human emotion, human error, and human suffering ; and the novel-readers who may honour it with their perusal are kindly requested to accept it as such. A main incident of the story, in fact, although cast in widely different times, was suggested by the ‘Hippolytus’ of Euripides.



EXPIATED.

OVERTURE.

THE SEA-BEACH.

A small fishing-cove, piled on its upper margin with masses of broken rock, below which the sand stretches hard and firm to the water-line.

On the sand, two children playing; a boy and girl: no great difference in their ages, she is eleven or thereabouts, and he may be some months older; of gentle condition both of them.

Their second play on the beach that day. All the morning they had played there; delving and shovelling away the loose sand with their spades; pausing — for the tide was flowing — to watch some long wave come curling in from the open roadstead outside, and fret itself away, with a swash and ripple, on

the curving bay-line. Then the spades again ; then another pause, as some pebble was thrown up, white and sparkling with the sea-water, almost to their feet, and borne off in triumph before the wave had time to wash it back again. And while this was being discussed and examined, perhaps a merchant-ship would appear in the offing with all sails set, courting every breath of the light pure air to fill them. Or, one of the fishermen would stroll down to the cove and get the nets and tackle ready for a start at sun-down ; and the spades would not be taken up again until this process was completed. So had passed the forenoon.

Then the children were summoned in to dinner. The girl was a visitor for the day at the house of her companion's father, which was only a few fields from the beach ; and they ran off, nothing loth, up the steep path in the brushwood, and along the hedge-rows to the house.

But in the afternoon they were back at the cove once more. Less disposed for play now, apparently ; less disposed for much active exertion of any kind. The sun struck hot from the water, and the air had fallen. The tide had turned too, and the beach was

strewn with shells ; fragments here and whole shells there, spiral and flat, single and double ; they wandered about and picked them up at their leisure, pockets full of treasures, each individualized and priced above all that had gone before it. Then, when this occupation came to an end, they seated themselves by the water's edge, and talked.

Talked, as children do, out of their life without memories, out of the vivid present, and the teeming future ; the boy doing most of the talking, and the girl listening ; his school, his dog ; the boat he was rigging ; the fishing-rod that was promised him ' some day when he was older.' Checking himself, too, now and then, with the consciousness of his monopoly of subjects, and waiting for hers in turn. But she liked listening best ; what she did say had so much of artless sympathy with the main speaker that it started him on his own topic again.

But the sun had begun to droop meanwhile. Still early in the afternoon ; a June afternoon ; but the tall cliff to westward of the cove already threw its shadow, as the day verged.

Over the lapping waters of the little bay first, close to the jutting headland on that side. Then it touched

the sand on the water's edge. Then it moved on to the two children as they sat in converse ; talker and listener as before.

It smote the girl first ; wrapping in its pall the slight figure and bent head, but without her noticing it. Then it strode on to the boy, unnoticed by him too ; it has built round them a broad wall of separation from the sunlight, but they neither see it.

Eventually he is the first to do so. He does not stop talking, he is too bright-hearted for that ; but he draws back, and shivers perceptibly. And then his companion interrupts him ; she takes the lead this time. ' Come away,' she said ; ' come away home. It is cold and dark down here ! '

CHAPTER I.

THE sketch given in the preceding pages does not belong to the same period as the commencement of our tale. The latter dates some years afterwards; summer as before, but a month later in this also; July, not June. From April onwards there have been heat and drought, both unusually severe: now, the weather seems breaking up; one or two thunder-showers have fallen, and then the wind turned, blowing up fresh from the southward.

That change is one sensibly felt in the fishing-cove of which we have written, and for a good many miles of coast either way along the peninsula whose limestone cliffs it indents. The peninsula is Gower; a picturesque although little known portion of South Wales, jutting out into the Bristol Channel immediately west of Swansea, and extending from the Mumbles light-house to a somewhat dreaded rock, whose resemblance to a snake uncoiled and

raising its neck in the act of striking, have given it the name of the Worm's Head.

Roger Beynon, at any rate, anticipates a bad time of it. He has drawn up his fishing-smack high on the beach out of harm's way, and is selecting, from the stock always ready to his hand there, two or three of the largest stones for the roof of his cottage just above, which has been newly slated this summer, and requires some ballast of the kind to prevent the work having to be done over again. At a short distance from him stands Sir Edgar Brereton's butler ; a new-comer in that capacity, and a new-comer to Gower altogether ; in fact, of Cockney extraction ; too long in service and too well-conditioned generally to exhibit much urban taint, although somewhat dismayed at the wild scenes of nature, as he judged them, among which he now found himself. Norris, for such was the butler's name, had paid the cove a first visit that morning, and was looking uneasily to windward.

‘I think we shall have rain,’ he said.

‘I don't think about it,’ replied Beynon, without desisting from his inspection of the broken fragments of rock in front of him. ‘You're a stranger here, or

you'd have heard her any time these twenty-four hours.'

'Heard *her*; who?'

'Why the Blow-hole, to be sure.' And here be it observed in passing that, although locally situate in South Wales, Gower is not Welsh. Here and there, a village or two retains the Welsh nomenclature; and the natural features of the district do so almost entirely; but the original inhabitants have been superseded by others. Many centuries since, a Flemish colony was planted on the adjacent coast of Pembrokeshire, and an overflow from this settled in Gower. They speedily took root there; exercised arts and commerce, and from temperament, soon came to assimilate more with the distant English among whom they traded than with the less civilised Welsh who were their immediate neighbours. At present, the population is to all practical purposes English; Flemish grafted on Saxon, and a steady, well-to-do graft of honesty and intelligence it is.

But we are leaving Norris unanswered. For when his companion spoke of the Blow-hole, the butler, who was no more enlightened than he had

been before, requested to be informed what that was.

‘Why, it’s the hole on the top of the Worm, to be sure. But there, of course you don’t know what that is either,’ continued the speaker, giving a kick of dissatisfaction to the block he had been last examining, and turning round to his companion. ‘That’s the Worm’s Head, out at the west end of the island as one may call it, for there’s water round it on all four sides almost ; and the Blow is a great hole in the rock, through which the air comes up ; when there’s coorse weather coming you may hear her miles off.’

‘How does the air get in there?’ asked Norris, who felt a keen interest in the natural phenomena amongst which his lot was now cast.

‘Oh ! nothing easier ; these rocks are full of holes ; besides, there’s the great cave at the end of the Worm, and, like enough, the Blow runs down to that, although nobody’s ever been in far enough to see.’

‘Can you go inside at all then ?’ asked Norris.

‘I have never been there,’ said Beynon, ‘nor any one else to my own knowledge, but they say it have

been done once or twice. I tried it a few years back, but it was no good, I had to give it up. It's only in a boat that you could get in, and then you must look out that a swell doesn't come on, or the wind get up; they'd wait supper for you long enough at home if that chanced. But there's caves all about here; they say it's the limestone makes them. Your stream goes underground in one place for ever so far.'

'What stream?' Norris asked again.

'Well, I thought you'd have found that out; it's not in sight from the house, it's nigher to that old castle, with the gateway; only just over the hill and along a few meadows. It goes away into the sea on the fur side of this cliff here,' the speaker continued, pointing to the lofty tor, as it is called in Gower, which rose on the west of the cove where they stood, fringed with bushes towards the summit, and descending from thence in an uninterrupted scarp to the water's edge.

'And is that where the stream goes underground?' Norris asked.

'No; that's a long way above, before the Ceniarth property begins; it runs steadily after it reaches that,

and a fine clear water it is for trout-fishing, except when rain has fallen ; then it's wild enough. By the way, Sir Edgar must do something about that bridge soon.'

'What bridge?'

'The one at the lower end of the park ; it's their private way to the village and to church. At least, when I say private, Sir Edgar never objects to any one crossing it, when they've a mind ; he's good-natured enough about things like that, for all he's such a dark man ; which, to be sure, he's had enough to make him, even without the old story.'

'But isn't the bridge safe then?' asked Norris, whose personal interest in the condition of this thoroughfare overweighed such curiosity as might have been aroused by the speaker's last words.

'I shouldn't call it safe,' said Beynon ; 'at any rate, it won't be much longer. It may stand what's coming up now, and may stand through the winter and spring too, frost and rain both ; but I expect that's the outside of it.'

'But why doesn't Sir Edgar have it repaired then?' asked Norris, still haunted with the perils of Sunday church-going under these circumstances ;

‘there’s no scant of money in the house, and no stint of it; I can see that already.’

‘No, the money’s plenty enough,’ said Beynon; ‘that’s not it.’

‘What is then?’ asked Norris.

‘Why, to make anything of a job they must pull the bridge down,’ said Beynon.

‘So I suppose; why shouldn’t they?’

‘Down to the foundations I mean,’ said Beynon again.

‘Like enough too,’ answered his companion; ‘but what of that? it wouldn’t ruin Sir Edgar if they did.’

‘No: it wouldn’t ruin anybody now, it’s past and gone, years ago; before I was born, or my father either, for that matter. But it’s the last thing in the world he’d care to do, for all that. It’s not quite certain, if the masonry was pulled down, what might be found at the bottom of it.’

‘Dear me,’ said the butler, whose apprehensions now began to take another turn, ‘how very uncomfortable: do you mean there’s anything wrong about the family? There was some old story you were talking of just now.’

‘You’ll hear it fast enough,’ said Beynon; ‘it’s no secret; I’d tell you about it myself, only here’s the rain coming, sure enough;’—some heavy drops in effect pattered on the fisherman’s glazed hat as he spoke;—‘although perhaps it’s best not, either: we’ve held our bit of land under the Breretons, father and son of us, nigh this hundred year, and mayhap I’ve no call to be telling aught to their disfavour. It was only what was suspected too, mind; nobody ever knew for certain: but they say it’s made them the dark men they’ve been ever since. And now good morning t’ye; ye’ll maybe get back to the house without a wetting, but not much more.’

Saying which, the fisherman strode up the shingly lane to his own cottage.

CHAPTER II.

‘Aw, well, Miss Delacombe, now you do surpwise me,’ said a voice, which, as it proceeded from a young officer of the line quartered at Swansea, made its imitation of the ‘Guards’ drawl,’ actual or reputed, even less engaging than the original. The scene is in Colonel Muspratt’s drawing-room, to which the gentlemen have just returned after dinner, the Colonel being one of the few residents in Gower who gave dinner-parties, or any parties at all, for that matter. Hatty Delacombe, the young lady addressed, and the vicar’s daughter of the parish in which Sir Edgar Brereton’s property was situate, has just made some remark to two other young ladies seated near her. Her father is also of the party, but in another part of the room ; Mr. Delacombe’s curate, who has not been long in the parish, a gentleman of the name of Langridge and of the age of thirty-five and upwards,

stands near Hatty, turning over a volume of photographs.

‘What surprises you?’ asked Hatty, who had an exceedingly downright manner of her own, turning round to confront the speaker at the same time : for the latter had struck into the conversation from behind.

‘Why, aw, that you should call Miss Bweweton a pwetty girl. I don’t consider she has any pwetensions of the kind.’

‘I am sorry for it,’ said Hatty, ‘for I am afraid we shall rather question your claim to be a judge upon the point.’

‘Aw but, weally, Miss Delacombe,’ persisted the speaker, whose name was Burrows, ‘look at her ovaw by the pianaw now. She’s not so badly put together, but it’s the face ; her complexion, aw, is wuinous.’

‘Take care or she will hear you,’ said Hatty, somewhat indignantly. ‘As to complexion, Alice’s is lovely ; it is dark, olive almost, but transparently clear, with such a warm flush in it when she is animated : it is just like the rest of the face ; you cannot judge of it in repose, although I should have thought even then any one must have admired it.

Of course, it's not a doll's face, if that is what you mean ; its beauty is quite of another order.'

'Gwieved that I can't see the beauty, Miss Delacombe,' replied Burrows. 'The other Miss Bweweton is well enough ; in fact, aw, quite pwesentable.'

'Léonie! I should think she was,' exclaimed Hatty 'You seem to have a very cynical estimate of young ladies' looks.'

'Aw, but it isn't looks only,' said Burrows ; 'it's whether a girl can talk, and have a little *savoir vivre* about her, and that sawt of thing. Miss Bweweton is so awfully heavy in hand.'

'That's exactly what she isn't,' said Hatty, whose colour had risen perceptibly during this dialogue.

'Excuse me, Miss Delacombe, but I speak fwom expewience: I assure you I took her in to dinnaw last week, and couldn't get her to wise at all ; twied her on all kinds of topics : felt as if I'd been sitting in the well at that place, you know.'

'Carisbrooke?' suggested Miss Lindsay, one of the young ladies with whom Hatty had been talking.

'No, that's the deep one, you know. I mean the other lot which petwifies you if you go into it.'

'Oh! the dripping well at Knaresborough,' said the

last speaker ; 'but I am afraid that's a spring, not a well really. You were not at Oxford, were you, Mr. Burrows?'

'I was not so far pwivileged,' said Burrows.

'Because my brothers tell me there is a bath there which turns you into spermaceti ; perhaps you meant that. What were the topics you tried Miss Brereton with, by the way?'

'Eveverything ; wace-ball, wegatta, wegiments, widing-horses . . .'

'Weading, witing and withmetic,' whispered Miss Lindsay, to Hatty, who however was too indignant to respond.

'Extwacted nothing from her,' continued Mr. Burrows, unconscious of this comment: 'seemed listening too, aw, as if she wanted to do her best ; thought she was going to give tongue once or twice, but nothing came of it. Wegular lump of a girl.'

'Alice Brereton is my particular friend, Mr. Burrows,' Hatty here interfered with an energy augmented by the restraint under which her feelings had been kept during the last few minutes. Fortunately, at this juncture Mr. Burrows was summoned to the piano to assist in the execution of a duet,

and the collision which seemed inevitable was averted. The young ladies with whom Hatty had been talking also moved at the same time, and as she was now alone, the curate laid down his photograph-book and occupied one of the chairs thus left vacant.

And here, to save mistakes, it may be as well to observe that this movement did not indicate any love-passages, past or future, between Mr. Langridge and his vicar's daughter. As regards the past indeed there had obviously been no time for this. But the future was equally privileged, and for a very sufficient reason; Mr. Langridge, whatever his aspirations might otherwise have been at his time of life, was engaged to be married before he became Mr. Delacombe's curate; and he became such with the knowledge of this fact preceding him. Besides, Hatty is not our heroine. We certainly might do worse: she is not pretty in the strict sense of the term, and would be the first to resent the false compliment which called her so; but she is as honest as the day: honesty in the open brow, the clear depth of grey eye, in every line and movement of mouth and cheek; honesty above all, in the speech and frank,

heartly laugh. After a day's work, or a day's despondency, or any other of the avocations or frames of mind which engender morbid sentiments in regard to one's self and one's species, a talk with Hatty is a positive cordial ! Still, our heroine in fact she is not ; and it has seemed a duty to prevent the reader being piloted inadvertently into a wrong channel of interest.

It was not without some amusement, as far as decorum permitted its exhibition, that Mr. Langridge watched his companion cooling down from her excitement. She caught the infection too before long ; and when their eyes met, Hatty, who was quite at home with the new curate, had a good laugh, and the temporary annoyance disappeared as if it had never existed. Seeing this, Mr. Langridge resorted to the subject of the late conversation, although divesting it of any unpleasant ingredients.

‘You are a warm champion on behalf of your friends, Miss Delacombe,’ he said, ‘and in the present instance the cause warrants you ; Miss Brereton is unquestionably pretty.’

‘I did not know you had overheard us,’ said Hatty ; ‘you seemed to be immersed in three generations of Muspratts. I am so glad you think so, though.’

‘I cannot understand any one thinking otherwise,’ said Mr. Langridge. ‘It is a *spirituelle* face, doubtless, but its beauty as such is of a high order; besides, as you say, expression is not the whole; even in repose the outline and complexion are lovely at times. May I venture, meanwhile,—’ he added, hesitatingly.

‘Venture what,’ said Hatty.

‘Why, to mention one doubt which strikes me in regard to Miss Brereton?’

‘I should be very foolish if I could not hear you do that without resenting it,’ said Hatty. ‘What is the doubt?’

‘Well,’ said Mr. Langridge, ‘of course I have seen very little of your friend; I have not had time to do so. But it does seem to me that she is cold, or might be thought so: chilling, perhaps even repellent in manner. Certainly not from the dearth of conversational power which Mr. Burrows ascribed to her.’

‘I shall ask Alice about that dinner-party,’ said Hatty; ‘she must have gone through tortures; she is so unselfish that I have no doubt she tried to enter even into that unspeakably small talk of Mr.

Burrows, but with her cultivated mind it must have been hard work.'

'Mind and soul both she has without question,' answered the curate. 'But I was struck,— may I confess it,—with Burrows' word, "petrified;" I am not quite sure that Miss Brereton does not give me that impression myself. When I look at her I seem reminded always of a stream I once saw in Switzerland; it was rapid, entirely transparent, a pale opal green, and flowing on a bed of ice; perfect purity, perfect beauty, but—intensely cold. Can you forgive me?'

'I don't think I shall,' said Hatty, 'unless you give me leave to do something?'

'What is that?'

'Why, to quote your description to Alice herself; it would amuse her beyond the bounds of moderation; at any rate, it would amuse me to laugh at her about it. Oh! Mr. Langridge, you are *so* wrong!'

'I have no doubt Miss Brereton is affectionate and kind, and so on; I did not mean that exactly.'

'No more do I,' said Hatty; 'she is that, but she is something so much beyond it too; if she ever loved it would be so intensely; just as unlike your ice-stream as possible! I know, though,' Hatty continued, 'what has given you the idea; it is her reserved

manner; cold, I daresay strangers might call it, although it is not really that, or reserve either, really; Alice naturally, I fancy, would be as well as talkative as I am. Poor girl! poor Alice!

‘Please go on talking now, Miss Delacombe. Why do you pity your friend so?’

‘Hush!’ said Hatty, lowering her voice; ‘he is standing not far from us: ah! he has moved now. The fact is, although it is not every one to whom I would speak of it, that Alice has cause enough for her manner;—a broken heart, I should call it, or something of the kind.’

‘How do you mean?’ asked the curate. ‘I rather gathered from what you said that Miss Brereton had not . . . I mean, that there had been no love-episode of any kind.’

‘None that I know of,’ said Hatty; ‘and I believe I should know it, if any one did. No, that is not Alice’s trouble. Simply a home-sorrow hitherto, although a very deep one. Quite from her infancy, Sir Edgar has been wholly estranged from her; in affection, that is.’

‘Really?’ said Mr. Langridge. ‘For what possible reason?’

‘Why,’ said Hatty, ‘it was something which hap-

pened: something,' she continued, with a slight flush on her temples, 'which I cannot exactly talk to you about, but which was very terrible; or very sad, rather. And it had a most powerful effect upon Sir Edgar.'

'In what way?'

'It brought out his real character,' answered Hatty; 'the family character, people say it always has been.'

'And what is that?' Mr. Langridge asked again.

'*Mercilessness*,' said Hatty, with a strong emphasis on the word. 'I daresay there must have been some traces of it before, but it never came prominently forward until this occurred. Although, of course,' Hatty continued, 'I only know about this by hearsay; I don't suppose I was even born at the time, for Alice is a year older than I am, and she was quite little then. It was just before Papa was presented to the living here, I believe.'

'And the family have always borne this character?' asked the curate.

'The father and grandfather, at any rate,' said Hatty. 'And Sir Edgar is almost worse than them, in one way.'

‘How so?’

‘Why,’ said Hatty, ‘because they were bad men, and he is so entirely the reverse; the most upright, honourable man possible, and, in many ways, a generous one too: it seems to have been his ambition all his life to make people forget what the last two baronets had been.’

‘And yet, with all these good qualities, he is worse than they were?’

‘Worse in one way,’ said Hatty; ‘more frightening; he has such a stern code of right; would be so pitiless to anyone who offended against it.’

‘But does he act with this harshness in daily life?’ asked Mr. Langridge. ‘He must be intolerable!’

‘Oh! no, I did not mean that,’ said Hatty; ‘his is too grand a nature for that. He is rather a gloomy, dark man, as the people here call it, and I believe, always was so, even before . . . before that happened; in fact, it had a great deal to do with it: but beyond this, there is nothing that would strike you about him ordinarily. No, it is only at times this fierce temper comes on; but it is very terrible then. I do believe that if any-

body connected with him, for instance, were to act falsely or dishonourably, especially if it were anything which brought discredit upon his own family, he would think no punishment too severe, not even death itself, if he could inflict it.'

'And he acted in this manner on the occasion you refer to?' asked the curate.

'Unforgivingly,' said Hatty; 'barred his door and his heart for ever after against poor Lady Brereton, although . . .'

'Ah! then of course I guess something of the story,' said Mr. Langridge; 'I had done so to some extent already. And Miss Brereton has been harshly treated by him too?'

'Not harshly,' said Hatty; 'quite the contrary; she has everything which Sir Edgar's daughter should have—except his love.'

'Poor girl,' said Mr. Langridge. 'But I do not understand one thing,' he added; 'it seems hardly consistent with what you have told me of Sir Edgar in other respects that he should refuse her his affection; she was not in fault, at any rate.'

'I do not think he meant to do so,' said Hatty; 'I fancy that he has even tried to feel towards her

as if nothing had happened. But he did not succeed; as he had steeled his heart against her mother, so it steeled itself, I suppose, against Alice; it was his punishment perhaps. And now he has long since given up even making the attempt.'

'And what has been the result to Miss Brereton herself?' asked the curate.

'What I said,' answered Hatty: 'it has crushed the very heart out of her; thrust back upon her from her childhood all the love she is yearning to give her father, if he would only let her. She just kisses his forehead on leaving the room at bedtime every night; that is the only affection which ever passes between them; there is a sort of understanding that nothing is to be tried beyond this. I dare say Sir Edgar is rather glad that they have got on this footing; it must save him some pain.'

'You are a student of character, Miss Delacombe,' said the curate.

'That I am very far from being,' said Hatty, laughing; 'of character or anything else that is useful, I am afraid; but of course I cannot help being interested about things at Ceniarth. I do feel some pity too for Sir Edgar himself, in spite of

his harshness ; as well as something else ;—a sort of curiosity, or rather fear, as to what he might do when this unforgiving temper is upon him : he is so entirely under the control of it ; just like a mad-man, in one way.’

‘There is nothing of that kind in the family, is there ?’ asked Mr. Langridge.

‘Nothing whatever,’ said Hatty, ‘or about him either. As far from it as possible, notwithstanding the dreary life he has led with Alice all these years : nearly twenty years now, for she is past twenty-one.’

‘Dreary indeed,’ said the curate. ‘By the way, who is that other lady I have seen at church with Miss Brereton ?’

‘Mrs. Ponsonby, you mean ?’ said Hatty. ‘She is Sir Edgar’s sister-in-law, the widow of a younger brother of his.’

‘Younger brother ?’

‘Yes,’ said Hatty, ‘he came into some property which was left to the second son, and had to change his name for it. He ran through it all, I believe, and then died ; and then, when Sir Edgar’s trouble happened soon afterwards, the widow, Mrs.

Ponsonby, came to live with him. *She* doesn't mend matters.'

'How so?' asked Mr. Langridge.

'Why,' said Hatty, 'she is as artful as Sir Edgar is the reverse; fair enough to talk to, but capable of any mischief behind your back. I can't endure the woman. I often wonder Sir Edgar doesn't find her out, but he does not seem to; on the contrary, I think he is a good deal led by her. I have a strong idea that she has made matters worse between Alice and her father; estranged him from her more completely.'

'The younger sister is staying away from home at present, is she not?' asked the curate.

'Younger sister! whom do you mean?' said Hatty, in a tone of some surprise.

'Why, the one you were speaking of before our conversation began; Miss Léonie Brereton.'

'Oh! do you not know?' exclaimed Hatty. 'Although, to be sure,' she added, interrupting herself, 'it is quite natural you should think so. Léonie is not Sir Edgar's daughter.'

'Really?'

'No, not even a near connection. Her father's

name was Brereton, the same as Sir Edgar's, but they belonged to quite a different branch of the family; hardly cousins even.'

'How does she come to reside at Ceniarth then?' asked the curate.

'Sir Edgar adopted her,' said Hatty. 'Her father and he had been schoolfellows at Westminster, and great friends there; then Captain Brereton, that was her father, married and went to the Mauritius with his wife, where they both died soon after, leaving Léonie penniless.'

'And Sir Edgar brought her up?'

'Yes,' said Hatty; 'he sent for her at once. I believe he had some idea of making her his heiress, giving Alice an allowance for her life only; but this is quite dropped now; he has settled some money upon Léonie instead. It is curious though, too,' added Hatty, recurring to the question which had led to this topic; 'I never thought of it before, but of course any one who did not know the circumstances would make the same mistake about Léonie that you did.'

'As to her being Sir Edgar's daughter, you mean?'

'Yes,' said Hatty, 'you might stay in the house

for months, I daresay, without finding out that it was not so. You see, her own name is Brereton; then she has always called Sir Edgar "Papa;" she began doing so of her own accord when she first came here as a little thing, and has always continued it. For many years indeed she did not know that he was not her real father: and when she had to be told this, he wished her to go on giving him the name.'

'It seems singular that he should,' said the curate, 'I gather that it was after that trouble of his.'

'Yes, several years,' said Hatty, 'but I quite understand Sir Edgar wishing it. With all his sternness he is very affectionate really; it is one of the good qualities I told you of; and the harder he became towards Alice the more fondness he shewed Léonie. It is a sort of vent for his own feelings; and she is such a happy, sunny-natured girl herself no one can help loving her.'

'You spoke of her as very pretty just now, I noticed,' said the curate.

'Exceedingly pretty,' said Hatty. 'Alice's face has more depth in it, but Léonie would certainly attract most. And she is a clever girl, too, and a

very dear one; I did not mean at all to imply the contrary; I love her as much as I can any one after my own friend. In the house she is invaluable; the only bright thing there.'

'That I can quite understand,' said Mr. Langridge. 'But is it not very triste for herself?'

'Nothing could be triste where she was,' said Alice. 'Besides, since Léonie has been out, Sir Edgar has gone more into society again: he is still at heart the same gloomy, implacable man, but externally he shews it less. Then, Alice is so devoted to her sister, as she always calls her.'

'Ah! I had meant to ask that question. How does Miss Brereton take her father's preference for his adopted daughter?'

'As she takes everything else from the time she gets up to the time she goes to bed,' said Hatty; '—without one thought or feeling for herself. I don't believe she knows what the word self means.'

'But she must feel Sir Edgar's harshness, or whatever is the proper term for it,' said the curate; 'it has so much crushed her, you say.'

'Entirely crushed her in one way; crushed the personal happiness out of her; given her that repel-

lent manner, although it really comes from her having been so repelled herself. But this only makes her fonder of Léonie. Indeed, fond is not the word; where Léonie is concerned, nothing can be too costly or too good! She has Alice's whole heart; all the wealth of lovingness,—for as I have told you, that is Alice's nature,—which has been repressed elsewhere.'

'Miss Léonie Brereton runs some risk of being spoilt, I fear,' said the curate.

'Not the slightest,' said Hatty. 'Léonie has plenty of faults, which you will find out when you come to know her; but vanity is certainly not among them. I didn't mean either that Alice flatters her, far from it. Even if she did, Léonie is so merry that it would glance off from her like . . . like . . . there, I never could make a simile, I haven't poetry enough; but in fact, she does not. She does nothing noticeable whatever; only just, from morning to night, Léonie is the one thing she lives for; just what the father would have been, if he would have let her. But I must have wearied you by this history of people with whom you have nothing to do.'

‘They are parishioners, at any rate,’ said Mr. Langridge. ‘By the way, talking of parishioners, when does your brother come home?’

‘Percy? Next week, I hope,’ said Miss Delacombe, whose eyes sparkled as she pronounced the name: ‘how do you know anything about him?’

‘Your father spoke of his being expected soon,’ said the curate. ‘I do not know what he is though; what profession, I mean.’

‘He has just finished his training for a sailor,’ said Hatty, ‘and passed the examination, too, which was the worst part of it. He is to be at home now until he gets appointed to a ship, which Papa is trying for: I am selfish enough to wish that it may be a long time first.’

‘He is your only brother?’

‘Yes; and we have seen so little of him the last few years; hardly more than a day or two at a time. He was at school in London, and then afterwards at Portsmouth and on his cruise, and in the holidays he has always been at our grandpapa Marriott’s.’

‘Your mother’s father, I suppose?’ said Mr. Langridge.

‘Yes. He has a large family property in Pem-

brokeshire, near Tenby; and he is so fond of Percy; then Lennox Marriott is nearly Percy's age, and it was pleasant for them to be together. Lennox will be twenty-one soon, and there are to be great rejoicings; he is the heir to the property when grandpapa dies, under some entail.'

'How is it your grandfather has a son so young?' asked the curate.

'He is grandson, not son,' said Hatty; 'our first cousin: his father died many years since. Percy is warmly attached to him.'

'Which a cynical man would observe is very amiable in him,' said Mr. Langridge. 'I suppose if anything happened to your cousin he would be next under the entail.'

'I suppose he would,' said Hatty; 'but I have never thought about it, and I am quite sure that he has not: thank Heaven, Lennox is well and strong enough to relieve us from any temptation to covet his property. No, Percy has his own way to make in the world, and I hope he will do so. He is such a dear fellow; not the least clever, rather deficient, he always considers himself, although I think that is a mistake; but so merry.'

‘Like Miss Léonie Brereton, then?’

‘Well, I suppose he is,’ said Hatty; ‘I never thought of it before. They have never been much together, though; Percy is three or four years older than she is; my senior by two years, in fact, although not half so grave and stupid; and of course that made still more difference when they were children. He and Alice saw a good deal of each other then.’

‘Their ages were nearer together, I believe? At least, I think that follows from what you said just now.’

‘Yes; Percy was twenty-two last week only, and Alice is one month past twenty-one.’

‘Miss Delacombe’s carriage,’ announced a footman, opening the drawing-room door.

‘The fly from the Gower Inn, that is,’ said Hatty: ‘I wonder if it was ever called a carriage before! Of course there is a seat for you, Mr. Langridge, if you will accept one.’

‘Which I will, and thank you heartily for it, some day; but I shall enjoy the walk home this evening: you already know my foibles in that respect. Good night.’

CHAPTER III.

OUR scene must shift for awhile; not capriciously, however, or without intimate bearing on the narrative of these volumes: there is little in them, in fact, which does not bear upon it.

A London suburb, four or five miles from the heart of the city. A lodging in one of the mean streets which have overspread what was once its meadowland and park enclosure; so numerous, so similar to each other, and so featureless in every respect except this similarity, that in the course of a ten-minutes' walk you might have traversed a score of them without the mind receiving any impression which would enable it to identify them apart.

The lodging is as mean as the locality. There is a first-floor sitting-room, with a bedroom behind it, and another on the floor above; the ground-floor and one remaining bedroom accommodate the proprietress, a widow, and her two or three sickly children.

There is no squalor about the house however. Everything is of the shabbiest, from the faded red curtains and yellow-craped pier-glass of what is, almost with a cruel irony, termed the drawing-room, to the threadbare oil-cloth and darned stair-carpet; but everything scrupulously clean, with such an attempt at neatness and arrangement as the conditions admit.

Of the landlady's immediate procurement this indeed. But it is a tribute which, in any event, would have been extorted by the two occupants of the lodging, both of whom are at present seated in the drawing-room: a small, very small fire, although the evening is chilly enough, burns or rather smoulders in the grate.

A young man, and a lady more advanced in life; mother and son, unmistakeably, from their resemblance: the son at a side-table, reading.

Not the lightest of literature, by any means. Easy enough to call it reading when you lounge down to the beach with the last new novel—so far as the seaside libraries supply such a commodity—and doze over it in the shade of a bathing-machine. Easy enough to talk of reading, even when it does

involve more brain-work, when the eye does collect what is in the page, and pass it on to the apprehensive faculty within. That is the reading of happy, prosperous men. But it is not the process which was going on at that side-table. Attention, even intelligent attention, is not thought; it does not write its story in the contracted brow and pale cheek as it does with the student who is toiling there, night after night.

Elementary works enough, too.

But he is young to them; young to the profession in which he hopes, some time or another, to make his way. Let us look at the titles of the books which stand on the table before him, and with one of which he is grappling.

‘Stephens’ Blackstone,’ 4 vols.; ‘Williams on Real Property;’ ‘Dart’s Vendors and Purchasers;’ ‘Fisher on Mortgages;’ ‘Leading Cases in Equity.’ Attractive, certainly!

And he is on the threshold of the outer porch merely, or just within it;—‘Blackstone,’ vol. 1, and no great way in that first volume;—conflicting with strange modes of thought in a strange nomenclature, sturdy and close-mailed combatants, yet all re-

quiring to be done battle with before he can penetrate within ; before he can even enter the lists with those other and doughtier opponents of his progress, much less make them, his slaves and vassals, the instruments of his future bread-winning !

Not for himself alone, either, that the bread has to be won.

Had this been so, it would have been easy work enough ; the hard uncongenial toil—for it is uncongenial—need not have been encountered. He has been at a large school, followed by a term or two at Oxford : quite scholar enough to earn, even at his present age of twenty or a few months under it, his own personal maintenance, food and raiment at any rate.

And he is fond of that work too ! Fonder, by many degrees, of prose and verse weaving, alas ! on his own account ; but still, enthusiast enough in his regard for the classics ; very different pabulum to Blackstone's chapter on 'Uses and Trusts !' Easy and pleasant lines enough those which would lie open to him as far as his own necessities extend.

But there is another necessity, another person to be considered ; one whom he is in the habit too of



considering, with very little exhibition of doing so, but with a very single-hearted postponement of any selfish views ;—the mother.

Let us turn to Mrs. Mansel, for that is her name : the son is Reginald.

Mrs. Mansel is a young mother, having regard to Reginald's age, and would be judged even younger than the forty years or thereabouts which do belong to her ; still slight in figure, notwithstanding the alleged proclivities of that time of life, and still capable of looking pretty.

This indeed is at times only. The features have been overcast in their habitual expression ; the stamp of some great trouble has been set upon them. But the trouble disappears now and then, and the young face, the face as it might have been, say, before Reginald's birth, reproduces itself.

Not with any of woman's loftier qualities, indeed. There are grace, vivacity, some tenderness, but nothing further ; but yet, in its possession of these, and notwithstanding some indications in it of a nature too readily plastic for good or evil, it is a face which, under prosperous circumstances, might well have brightened hearth and home.

As things are, the circumstances are not prosperous. You would have inferred that, not only from the poverty-stricken accessories of the place and scene, but, still more, from a pitiaibly care-worn look, in mother and son, and most so in the former; quite separable from the traces of the deeper-seated grief just referred to. Who knows not, in this or that countenance, the transcript of the penurious, pinching daily life? the conflict of some gently-nursed nature with the rapacity and insolence which form the obverse of so much fawning behind the counter; the haggling and paring and stinting which contrast so painfully with the old affluence, then only straitened in its power of creating a new want?—Many a cheek, still fair and young enough, has those lines photographed on it, besides Mrs. Mansel's!

She is making tea at present; has made it some time since, and poured out both cups. The smaller one for herself, which she is drinking in silence; the larger one, student-fashion, for her son, to be handed to him when some break in his reading sanctions the interruption.

The opportunity is not long of occurring. Reginald, who has been excavating and navigating for

the last twenty minutes in the stiff loam of the 'Statute for transferring uses into possession,' raises both arms from the table, and tilts his chair back with a formidable groan.

'Poor Reginald !' said his mother, handing him the cup.


'Poor Mamma !' said the person addressed ; ' these evenings are awfully dull for you. How different it used to be in the old times when we played chess together ! I feel quite selfish for not offering a game now, but what with the work at Dayman's chambers in the day, and these merciless books at night, my brain-force, such as it is, is fairly exhausted. I don't suppose that I could repel even that transparent attack you are so fond of concocting against my king, queen, and castle simultaneously ; a regular Gunpowder Plot, only without the dark lantern. I tell you what, though, Mamma, we might try *bézique*.'

'If you think you can spare the time,' said Mrs. Mansel, who was unquestionably finding the evening dreary, and, with all her resolutions of not interrupting Reginald, had not the moral courage to refuse this offer.

‘Oh! that will be all right,’ said Reginald; ‘it’s only sitting up an hour later, and it will do me good to knock off work for a bit between whiles. I shall come back with all the better appetite to Stephens, although it *is* rather like chewing slate-pencils.’

Reginald spoke gaily, but, in spite of himself, a sigh escaped him as he did so. And any one who had studied the speaker’s physiognomy would have seen that the sigh was more in harmony with it than the uttered words.

A handsome face, too; something specially attractive about the eyes and brow, a kindliness in the one, and an open breadth about the other, which evidence at once feeling and thought. Handsome, but grave; the lines of the mouth, in particular, strongly moulded; not sternly, but so as to convey the impression without which no face, whether in man or woman, entirely satisfies the looker-on; that of a resolute purpose, capable, should need require, of holding its own against all odds. Very different from the mother in this respect: she would be the tool of circumstances; her son, at any rate where right and truth were involved, would be their master.



And for some years past Mrs. Mansel has felt this. Young as he is, she has come to feel Reginald's moral guidance ; to lean upon him, not only in matters of ordinary business, but in questions in which a stronger nature can neither divest itself of the responsibility nor seek to do so ; to feel his protection valuable at times even against herself !

But we are detaining the reader too long over these preliminaries.

Mrs. Mansel proceeded to arrange the table for *bézique*, and her son continued speaking as she did so ; replying apparently to such implication as might be supposed to be conveyed by the sigh which had followed his last words.

‘Not that I am out of heart,’ he said, ‘or mean to complain in any way ; that would be very ungrateful after uncle Woodroffe’s kindness. Few men would do for his wife’s sister and her child what he does for us, especially now that my aunt has been dead for so many years ; and that with his limited income too.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Mansel, ‘Robert is very kind ; I am sure we owe him a great deal.’

‘Owe him our past and present maintenance,

Mother,' said Reginald, 'as well as the opportunity he is now giving me of qualifying myself to relieve him of the burden hereafter. I shall soon be able to do so,' he added, speaking so cheerily this time that the sigh which again rose to his lips as he glanced at the volumes before him was stifled in the utterance.

'I hope so indeed, Reginald,' said his mother; 'in fact it is most important for us that you should get on at the bar, which of course you will do as soon as you are called. Mrs. Oliver is a very civil, obliging woman, and does her best for us; but still, these are poor lodgings. I could feel more cheerful if we had things a little more comfortable round us.'

'I was thinking of dear uncle when I spoke,' said Reginald, 'although I will do my best for both your sakes. He must deprive himself of a great many comforts, almost necessities in his infirm state of health, to allow us what he does.'

Mrs. Mansel was not constitutionally selfish; probably, in easy circumstances, she would have been the reverse; her abundance, at any rate, would have aided in ministering to the needs of others. But the grip of poverty had drawn the heart-strings tight

together, and her reply ran in a wholly selfish channel.

‘Reginald,’ she said, ‘I am very apprehensive about my brother-in-law’s health. It is a terrible thing to think of, and I have tried to fight off the conviction as long as I could ; but he seems breaking, and you know he has only a life income. If anything were to happen to him we should be beggars. Oh ! Reginald, if you had only . . .’

Mrs. Mansel’s further speech was choked by a sob. Reginald laid his hand gently on hers ; the tone of his mother’s words jarred upon him, and an expression of pain crossed his face as she uttered them, but he made no reference to this ; only replied to her unfinished sentence.

‘Do not let us talk of that, dear Mother,’ he said ; ‘it will only distress you and myself ; distress me, because of the pain it gives you. There is nothing else which I would not have done for your sake,’ he continued, after a pause, ‘but I dared not do that. To have taken the living with the feeling that I was doing so for a purely secular purpose, purely for the sake of the income, and even of maintaining you out of it, would have seemed to me blasphemy. Indeed,

indeed, Mother, I have tried to get over this; tried to give myself the feelings and motives which can alone justify a man in taking orders, but it was no use, shame to me for it. It ought to be easy enough to devote oneself in this way, considering Whose service it is; but the feeling would not come, would not be forced.'

'But it might have come in time, Reginald,' pleaded his mother. 'And you see there were at least four years before you need have decided; your uncle had arranged for the living to be held *in commendam*, as I believe they call it, until you could take it. Reginald, dearest,' she continued, with a look almost amounting to pathos in its selfish pleading, 'it is not too late, not quite too late, even yet; he has not presented any one yet; I do not think he has even promised; in fact, I am sure he has not. Reginald, think what it would be for us to have 900*l.* a-year; to have it quite certain, only four years hence, whatever happened to your uncle meanwhile! Reginald, can you refuse me this?'

A terrible temptation crossed the young man's mind at this moment; an intensely subtle one: subtle because, while it urged its plea in the cha-

racter of a motive at once blameless and powerfully felt, its real strength lay in something else ; in the gratification of a long-cherished personal wish.

Provision for the parent, who, with all her faults—and none knew them better than Reginald—still loved him fondly, and who now, in her passionate entreaty, almost threw herself at his knees, beseeching him ; provision for her, yes, and how much more, comfort, ease, practical affluence ;—undoubtedly all these stood forward as the prominent objects in the picture conjured up by Mrs. Mansel's words. But behind them, swart in shadow, and yet giving, like one of Rembrandt's back-grounds, the entire force to the sketch, was the completion of a long-cherished desire : the pleasant undergraduate life of the University ; its congenial studies ; the easy indifference afterwards, affording ample means and ample leisure, —for the income of the living outnumbered its population—for the literary production on which Reginald's whole soul was set ; all this, lying ready to his hand, waiting to be substituted, if he would only do so, by one word, one stroke of the pen, for the heart-wringing toil of his present life !

Many men would have succumbed to such a temptation; many have.

That Reginald did not was due, as much as anything else, to the strong purpose which we have seen his face vouch, and the very strength of which lies in its having a past as well as a present; something to fall back upon, when the force immediately called into requisition would be inadequate. 'The rope was taut between the hindermost guide and myself,' Mr. Whymper wrote in describing the most terrible of Alpine disasters, 'and the shock came upon us as one man!'

But we are substituting an ethical analysis for Reginald's answer.

'Mother,' he said, gently replacing Mrs. Mansel in her seat, 'I dare not do this thing. There would be no blessing upon it; none to you, none to myself; how should there be? I should be dishonoured and degraded in my own thoughts all my life. Dearest Mother,' he continued, 'do not urge me again, do not again refer to it; I might be weak and give way, and I should never have a happy hour afterwards; promise me that you will not. I will work at law ten times harder than I have done, do any-

thing and bear anything, if you will only promise this.'

Mrs. Mansel gave the assurance he asked, sobbing to herself as she did so. Then, after a few minutes, her brighter temperament came to her aid, and she completed her arrangements for the *béziq*ue which this conversation had interrupted.

Reginald took his cards, and began playing in silence. But he soon threw them down again; the topic recently discussed had been too exciting to allow of his fixing his mind upon the game. Besides, still graver matters for thought had arisen out of it.

'I have something to ask you, Mother,' he said after a minute's silence.

Mrs. Mansel looked up at the speaker with a perceptible tremor; she had her own suspicions as to the nature of the intended question. She did not interrupt him, however.

'Mother!' Reginald repeated after a further pause.

'Yes, Reginald.'

'Do you remember something we spoke about one Christmas, several years ago; when I was thirteen?'

Mrs. Mansel's lips moved, but she made no reply;

Reginald saw, however, that she knew to what he referred, and continued.

‘I have purposely shut my lips upon the subject since that time,’ he said ; ‘purposely abstained from again asking you what I then did, because I saw how it pained you. But something tells me that I ought to do so now, however unwillingly ; I have felt this for several months past, ever since I left school, in fact.’

Mrs. Mansel still remained silent, and Reginald proceeded.

‘Dearest Mother,’ he said, ‘you know what I would ask. This mystery ; this total ignorance that I am in about my father ; may it not be cleared up now ?’

Mrs. Mansel shook her head with an expression of dissent, but still said nothing. Reginald resumed.

‘Remember, Mother,’ he said, ‘that on the occasion I refer to you did not give me the least clue ; told me nothing about him ; either then or at any former time ; and Uncle Robert, when I have asked him, has been equally reserved. I have tried to bear this contentedly, but I do not feel that I can much longer ; to-night, especially, the longing

to know something seems uncontrollable. It came from what we were talking about. I could not help recurring to it, could not help wishing that I had some better help or guidance than my own; or, at any rate, that I knew why I am deprived of them. Mamma, who and what is my father? Will you not tell me?’

Mrs. Mansel trembled violently. Evidently she was trying to frame a denial of her son’s request, but his impetuosity overbore her; in the first instance, at least.

‘Reginald,’ she said in a whisper, so faint that he could scarcely catch the words, ‘you have no father. You lost him many years since, before you were even born.’

The tears sprang to Reginald’s eyes, followed immediately by a look of perplexity.

‘But, Mamma,’ he exclaimed.

He had said this two or three times, although still hesitating to complete his sentence, before Mrs. Mansel answered. She was leaning on the table; not sobbing now, but apparently casting about for some mode of escape from her son’s enquiry. She was compelled to answer him, however.

‘Yes, Reginald,’ she said.

‘Why,’ said Reginald, ‘I do not quite understand ; you do not wear mourning, however slight, and you never have, as far as I can recollect ; and I remember you when I was quite young. Why was this ?’

Mrs. Mansel paused a long time, but she did reply at last, rising, as she did so, and endeavouring to regain some composure of voice and manner, although the quivering of her lip and the hot flushing of the cheek belied both.

‘Reginald,’ she said, ‘I *cannot* tell you ; it is impossible ; you will be most cruel, most unkind if you press me further. Oh ! why could we not go on as we were doing ! Reginald, this must not occur again ; I have given you my promise to-night, and you must give me yours in return. I cannot bear it, it will kill me.’ And here the assumed firmness entirely broke down, and Mrs. Mansel wept like a child.

Reginald waited until the violence of her emotion had subsided, and then spoke again.

‘But, dearest Mother,’ he said, ‘do you mean that I am never to be told ; never to know who I really am ?’

‘At my death,’ sobbed Mrs. Mansel; ‘it is down in writing among my papers; you will know everything then.’

‘And not earlier?’ Reginald still pleaded; ‘I shall be twenty-one at the end of next year; will you not tell me then, Mamma?’

Mrs. Mansel still shook her head, with a gesture of earnest deprecation. ‘No, no,’ she feebly murmured; ‘I cannot.’

‘But think, Mother dear,’ said Reginald, ‘it may be absolutely necessary for me to know; necessary for my profession, or for twenty reasons; you would not keep me in ignorance in that case?’

‘Let us wait till the necessity comes,’ said Mrs. Mansel, eagerly catching at the postponement; ‘that will be quite time enough, Reginald. Of course,’ she added, after a pause, during which she seemed to have been reflecting, ‘of course there is one event which would compel me to do what you ask; at least, I suppose it would; I have never considered the matter. But not now; nothing can, or at any time before my death, unless there is positive need; you must promise me that, Reginald?’

Mrs. Mansel, now that she had recovered from her

first emotion, spoke with some firmness ; she was not without spirit, and on occasions like these it would often show itself. Her son, although with reluctance, did as she had requested, and Mrs. Mansel retired to her room.



CHAPTER IV.

‘PAPA, here he is,’ exclaimed Hatty Delacombe breathlessly, throwing open the study door at Trecoed vicarage to its utmost extent as she did so; ‘here is Percy!’

‘Where, my dear?’ said her father, who was busied in the manipulation of his next Sunday’s discourse; ‘I don’t hear the pony-chaise.’

‘No, Papa; but it’s just coming round the corner by the blacksmith’s; I have been watching for it from my window. I must run down to the gate.’ And off Hatty started forthwith.

As his sister had told Mr. Langridge, Percy was a merry fellow; his voice was heard at intervals along the road, as the chaise drove up the street of the humble village, several minutes before he showed himself in person. Trecoed had a strong affinity for Percy, and, notwithstanding his absence from home of late, he was by no means forgotten there;

the whole population seemed to be aware that he was coming to-day, and turned out, old and young, to welcome him; and it was the cheery ring of his greetings in reply which had thus outstripped the vicarage pony.

And when Percy jumped down at the gate, and returned his sister's embrace as warmly as it was given, you saw that the face was all the voice had promised; not handsome in any sense, but with a frank honesty about it which would have stamped its owner, even had the features been less similar, as Hatty's brother; while its boyish animation, contrasting with the sister's graver manner, represented the points of difference in the two characters.

'And now, Hatty,' said Mr. Delacombe, after the salutations appropriate to the occasion, and the fragmentary discussion of some score of other topics, appropriate or not, 'the most dutiful thing you can do is to carry Percy off somewhere till lunch-time; I have only written two pages of my sermon, and I have parish work all day to-morrow.'

'And next day is Sunday,' said Percy, 'so the position is really critical. I say, Papa, why don't you have a tub?'

‘Thank you, I prefer my own pulpit,’ said Mr. Delacombe.

‘I didn’t mean to preach upon,’ said Percy; ‘only for potting sermons.’

‘Potting!’ said Hatty.

‘Yes, the old rector at uncle’s place does it; when he writes any sermons he turns a tub end up, and drops them in one above the other; then, when it’s full, he turns it upside down again and knocks the bottom out, and vice versâ; so that he ensures a regular rotation. Come along, Hatty.’

‘And where have you come from to-day?’ asked Hatty, when her brother had deposited himself on the drawing-room sofa.

‘From Devizes,’ said Percy; ‘started in the middle of the night by train, and right across country for ever so far; then, when we got on the main line, had a splendid run in a parliamentary, with the express close behind us; thought the game was all up for the last mile or two, but just got shunted off in time at the junction.’

‘How very frightful,’ said Hatty. ‘Where is Devizes?’

‘Well,’ said her brother, ‘that’s just what I always

say. What's the good of all you girls learn? when you are asked the most rudimentary questions in geography or history or that sort of thing, you never know. Devizes is in North Wilts.'

'But one can't know all the places in North Wilts, Percy.'

'Perhaps not; but Devizes is a very distinguished place, an assize town; they hang there, and guillotine there.'

'Percy!' exclaimed his sister.

'Yes, they do; guillotine the pigs, only of course you know nothing about that; it's where the Wiltshire bacon all comes from, there or thereabouts.'

'But what has that to do with guillotining?' said Hatty.

'Why the pigs stand in a row, and then some machine drops, and you see a hundred or two heads rolling down in the trough in front of you. The pork-butchers cut the heads in half afterwards—longitudinally, if you know what that means—and stick them up in their shop windows, where they look like the judges sitting in their wigs at Westminster.'

'But who lives at Devizes, Percy?' asked his

sister, who was much too delighted at the return of the absentee to keep the conversation within any fixed orbits of thought.

‘Lives at Devizes? why nobody.’

‘And what did you go there for then?’ asked the downright Hatty.

‘Nobody that you know, I meant: I went for a christening. I was godfather.’

‘No!’

‘Yes,’ said Percy, ‘I was; the last addition to the family; such an awful spectacle wherever visible, and such lungs whenever audible, which was at most hours of the day and night.’

‘*What* family?’ interposed Hatty.

‘Why, the Irvings; I told you you didn’t know them. Wasn’t it a sell though; I had to make a speech; hadn’t the least idea it was expected, until a clerical party the other side of the table jumped up on his legs and told me so; might as well have had a torpedo explode under one. I never could speak two words of sense together.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘I don’t know. I said I was awfully sorry; and that just when I was called upon in that unprece-

dented manner, I was observing to the young lady next me how jolly christenings were, for you had all the pheasant-pies and no speeches; and so I was.'

'But that wasn't all?'

'No,' said Percy; 'then I said that . . . that . . . well of course I didn't want to make fun of what we'd been doing, so I thanked Canon Andrews for what he'd said to us, and told him I wished I could be christened over again myself and I'd try and do better.'

'Yes; go on.'

'That was all,' said Percy. 'Of course I wished the little fellow health and happiness, and many years of both, and said that he had really won laurels at his ceremony; although I am afraid that was rather pagan, wasn't it? I thought the Canon looked as if it was,' continued Percy, 'so I reverted to the previous sentiment, and said that what I really meant, which I suppose I did, was that he might be rich and prosperous, as they weren't bad things altogether, but that whatever he was, he might . . . do his duty, you know, only I put it differently . . . and, and, in short be as little as

possible like his godfather. I say, Hatty, how's that grim old Sir Edgar ?'

'Nonsense, Percy : he isn't particularly old, and I'm sure he's not grim.'

'Isn't he though,' said Percy ; 'you know, Hatty, you're as frightened at him yourself as possible.'

'No, he's very polite always, and really very kind at times ; think what he has done for the poor people here, and for Papa himself too when he wanted help.'

'For all that, Miss Hatty, you wouldn't care to be three weeks with him in the Eddystone Lighthouse all by your two selves. Oh ! by the way, who do you think I met in town the other day : such a jolly girl as she's grown, too ?'

'I haven't a notion,' said Hatty.

'Well, you ought to have then,' said her brother, 'although really I didn't know her at first, she's so much altered. Can't you guess?'

'You don't mean Léonie ?' said Hatty.

'Yes, I do,' said Percy. It's years since I've seen her ; whenever I have been at home, she has always been in the nursery, or school-room, or elsewhere. How pretty she is now !'

'And greatly admired, I suppose ?' said Hatty, in

whose accents a tone of something like disappointment, although evidently in no way referable to the person of whom they had been speaking, seemed for the moment to have mingled. It quickly disappeared however, and Hatty resumed. 'Admired in the right way I mean,' she said, 'as a thoroughly unaffected, loveable girl, as well as a pretty one. I suppose she goes out a great deal?'

'Well, no, I fancy not; she was staying in a very quiet part of the town, near the Bayswater Road; some of her relations live there, she told me. But you know, Hat, I am no authority on fashionable life.'

'You have plenty of introductions,' said Hatty.

'Yes,' said her brother, 'uncle insisted upon it, he and Papa, and of course I called and left cards, as in duty bound. But I never went to any of their swell entertainments when I could help myself; I hated them. It was quite at a hum-drum little gathering that I met Léonie; a regular tea-party, like Mrs. Barker's at Swansea used to be. I had no idea there were such things in London.'

'And you have not asked after your old play-

fellow Alice,' said Hatty, with some reproduction of the look which had crossed her face a few minutes before.

'No, I know I haven't,' said Percy, 'what's the use? She will have forgotten all about that time; forgotten about me too, most likely.'

'Nonsense, Percy,' said Hatty again; 'you don't believe that really. Besides, she has seen you in the holidays off and on; when you have thought fit to be at home, that is.'

'She won't care to see me now, though,' said Percy, 'that I am quite sure of. It was all very well when we were children, but I should simply bore her now.'

'You don't bore me,' said Hatty.

'No, I don't mind talking nonsense to you, but I should be afraid to with Alice, she is so unspeakably above me in everything; I knew that well enough even when we were boy and girl together.'

'Fancy being afraid of Alice!' said Hatty. 'Of course I understand what you mean,' she continued, 'I feel it myself; she has so much in her that you fancy she could never care for you, until you find she does. As to talking nonsense, Alice can do that

fast enough when she chooses. She is coming here this morning.'

'Be sure then you make her stop to lunch,' said Percy.

'I will try,' answered Hatty, 'at least if you will promise not to tell her how grim her father is. As to being sure, that is another matter; when Alice has settled to do anything she generally persists in doing it; and I know to-day she was going over to see old Mrs. Meadows. Oh! by the way, Percy, there has been such a quarrel.'

'Who have been quarrelling?' asked Percy.

'Why your old friend Mr. Jarratt and Peter Meadows,' said Hatty. 'Peter is the old lady's nephew, and has just come here as rate-collector for the district; he has taken the house at the top of the village, next door to Mr. Jarratt's.'

'And what was the quarrel about?' asked Percy; 'the rates?'

'No, only about those three elms,' said Hatty. 'Peter thought they were dangerous, and so one day, while Mr. Jarratt was away, he had them lopped half-way down, which has quite spoiled them of course. Mr. Jarratt was furious when he saw what had happened.'

‘I entirely sympathise with him,’ said Percy; ‘what did he do?’

‘Sent Peter a most intemperate note,’ answered Hatty, ‘which Peter returned in kind, and they have not spoken to each other since; it is a fortnight ago now. Papa is dreadfully unhappy about it: they were not exactly intimate before, but very good friends, and being neighbours makes it so much worse; it is the talk of the whole parish.’

‘I will go and put that straight,’ said Percy; ‘I could always get round Mr. Jarratt, even when I was a brat. Where’s my wide-awake, Hatty? Oh! all right, I’ll be back presently.’

‘Come up to see you, Mr. Jarratt, the first of anybody,’ said Percy, when the preliminary greetings had been exchanged, and Percy had seated himself in that gentleman’s comfortable parlour.

‘You find great alterations here, Sir,’ said Mr. Jarratt, in whose mind the injury he had sustained still formed the prominent topic; notwithstanding some half-consciousness, which, however, he would scarcely have confessed to under torture, that he had not acted with signal discretion in the matter.

‘Well, really, Mr. Jarratt, I don’t know that I do,’ said Percy; ‘things look pretty much as they did. I am sorry to see though that those elms have been blown down.’

‘They were not blown down, Sir,’ said Mr. Jarratt, sententiously.

‘Please don’t call me Sir, Mr. Jarratt,’ said the visitor, ‘or you’ll frighten me: call me Percy as you used to do. How did the elms lose their tops then?’

‘They were cut off them,’ said Mr. Jarratt; ‘my neighbour, Mr. Meadows, thought fit to order it; they are on his ground, I believe, as a matter of strict right; at any rate, he had it done.’

‘And on purpose to annoy you, I fear,’ said Percy, ‘although I am surprised that any one should do that; he would have the sympathies of the whole parish against him, so kind and generous as you are to everybody. Do you remember how you used to tip me before I went to school always?’

‘That was nothing worth speaking of, my boy. As regards the trees,’ continued Mr. Jarratt, who was the very soul of candour, ‘I must do the man the justice to say that I don’t think any annoyance

was intended. I believe he considered them unsafe; or somebody had told him they were.'

'Well, I suppose that was true enough,' said Percy; 'I caught sight of one of the main limbs which has been left on the ground there, and the wood seemed thoroughly rotten. Mr. Meadows has children, perhaps?'

'Yes, several,' said his companion.

'Ah! I dare say he was frightened for them,' said Percy; 'there were two pretty little girls standing at the door as I came in; it would have been terrible if any accident had occurred. However, it was really more your affair than his; the trees would all have come this way.'

'Do you think so?' asked Mr. Jarratt, who, as Percy knew, was of a highly nervous temperament himself.

'Not a doubt of it,' said Percy; 'the slope of the ground would bring them right upon you. It's no joke a great elm coming down; we had one blown over in our school-yard some years ago;—crash through the dormitories, chimneys, roof, flooring, and everything; it was a mercy there was nobody there at the time. Still, of course,' Percy

resumed, after giving his companion time to realise this occurrence, 'of course Mr. Meadows ought to have consulted you first. I suppose, between ourselves, he is not quite in our own position of life. He is a rate-collector, is he not?'

'Yes,' said Mr. Jarratt.

'Ah! then you see,' said Percy, 'that is just it: a man may be most estimable, and, quite the gentleman in many ways, quite worth being friends with, and yet not understand those sort of things; they don't come natural to him. It's not the way you would have acted yourself, but you see there is just the difference. Of course you took no notice of it?'

'Why, yes, Percy,' said Mr. Jarratt, who now began to feel somewhat ashamed of himself, 'I did—that is, I wrote him a note. I believe, in fact,' continued Mr. Jarratt, still with evident hesitation, 'that I wrote pretty strongly.'

'Ah!' said Percy, 'I am sorry for that; it would only lead to retaliation, and it is such a pity to have bad feeling between neighbours. However, I'm a young fellow, and have no right to talk about such things to my elders and betters. What day will you come and dine with Papa, Mr. Jarratt? he will be

so glad to see you, as you know, and I want to hear some of the old stories again.'

So Percy referred specifically to certain of the stories in question, and had one of them in full tale upon the spot; after which, as Percy renewed his invitation, and as the Vicarage dinners were good and the Vicar's port still better, that matter was specifically adjusted also, and Percy rose to leave; or rather, made a feint of doing so, for he came back from the door.

'Dear Mr. Jarratt,' he said, taking that gentleman's hand in both his own, 'will you let me ask you something?'

Mr. Jarratt's heart sunk within him with a vague surmise of what was coming; but he murmured some form of assent, notwithstanding.

'Well, I'm a plain-spoken fellow,' said Percy, 'as I dare say you know; "impudent young rascal," you always used to call me; so I won't beat about the bush. Don't you think you and Mr. Meadows could make it up?'

'I don't see how it's possible,' said his companion.

'You wouldn't mind doing it, would you?' asked Percy.

Mr. Jarratt gulped down something which probably represented the final outpourings in his system of the sense of injury, outraged pride, and vindictiveness. He could not quite master his voice, however, for the required assent, so Percy took it for granted from the absence of any contrary utterance.

‘Then it’s quite possible, dear Mr. Jarratt,’ he said; ‘nothing easier. Couldn’t you just write a line to say that you feel you have been a little hasty, and ask permission to withdraw your original note? It would be quite dignified, in Mr. Meadows’ and your mutual position.’

Mr. Jarratt reflected, but intimated that he hardly saw his way to the preparation of such a document.

‘Will you authorise me to say it then?’ asked Percy. ‘You may be sure I will not compromise you in any way, and it will be such a good thing to have this terminated: Trecoed is a little place, and it is so painful to have bad blood between any of us here.’

Thus urged, Mr. Jarratt at length gave the required permission, and Percy went in next door with his message; which, as Mr. Meadows was fortunately at home, and as the emissary dispatched his

task with tact and adroitness, had the effect of terminating the feud before sundown.

Percy's own departure homewards of course took place at a much earlier hour; incontinently upon the successful accomplishment of his charitable office. Nor was the latter without its reward; at least, it resulted in the removal of a doubt which Percy had recently expressed to his sister.

As he ascended Trecoed street for the second time that forenoon, Alice Brereton came out of one of the cottages in advance, and walked forward in the direction of the Vicarage. And when Percy had achieved the few rapid strides which were required to overtake her, Alice turned round at the sound of footsteps, and recognised him forthwith; holding out her hand, as she did so, with a frank smile.

'I am so glad to see you, Miss Brereton,' said Percy, as he took the proffered palm in his own.

Apparently, Alice had it on her lips to address him as Percy; but as the gentleman was thus ceremonious, it beseemed her to comport her own speech accordingly. She did not however entirely do this; did not call him, 'Mr. Delacombe,' but, evading the name, answered, simply enough, 'I am very

glad you should say so : it is so pleasant meeting again.'

'That was old Daniel's cottage you came out of,' said Percy ; 'is he on the sick list?'

'No, it's his wife,' said Alice ; 'I took her down something from home just now.'

'I hope he doesn't get outrageous with her,' said Percy. 'Do you remember how he used to charge the boys with his stick, when he had had too much, saying that he was cutting his way through the enemy? does he do that still?'

'No,' said Alice, 'poor Daniel's Waterloo days are quite over ; he can hardly move from his chair now. It was not his fault, you know, altogether ; he did fight very bravely there, and did get wounded in the head, so that a very little upset him always. But he can't offend any more now.'

'I see, Miss Brereton,' said Percy, 'that you are as ready with excuses for people's faults as ever. I wonder if you recollect marching into Papa's study one day when he was going to cane me, and telling him, then and there, that he was a great tyrant, and that you knew I had been working at my lessons all the morning?'

‘I hoped you would have forgotten that,’ said Alice, blushing; ‘I am so dreadfully ashamed whenever I think of it. But you know,’ she added, deprecatingly, ‘I was a very, very small child then.’

‘The more plucky of you to do it,’ said Percy. ‘Are you as fond of poetry as you used to be in those days?’

‘I am very fond of it, certainly,’ said Alice.

‘You could go on repeating piece after piece, I remember,’ said Percy, pursuing the thread of his recollections, ‘while I, like a great cub, could do nothing but pitch stones into the sea, or scuttle in after the young crabs. What a quantity you must know by heart now.’

‘I have not much time for reading poetry or anything else, now,’ said Alice.

‘Haven’t you, Miss Brereton?’ asked Percy; ‘I should have thought you had unbounded leisure in this quiet place. I suppose, though, that you do a great deal in the parish; between you and Hatty the poor people must be well looked after.’

‘I am afraid I am very useless,’ said Alice; ‘your sister could tell you so. Léonie is the only efficient

representative of our family, and very active she is. I call her the Archdeacon.'

'I have been telling Hatty about Miss Léonie Brereton,' said Percy: 'I met her in town a few days since, and we talked together for a whole evening. What a charming girl she is; and how pretty!'

As Percy spoke, a momentary shade of some kind—hardly a shade, either; more the involuntary reflection of some suddenly felt pain—swept across Alice's features; so momentary, however, that it had passed away again before it was possible to identify its character, much less to analyse it in any way. And yet, in the thought which produced that transient expression, in the rapidly-formed resolution which led to its disappearance, the destiny of both speakers had begun to shape itself!

A thought to which the wish was father; but in a sense entirely opposite to that in which the poet wrote the words. There *was* a wish, how much more than a wish! a day-dream so long cherished, so closely woven into heart and brain, that its disappointment must needs wring them with a quick agony. Alice loved Percy Delacombe; could never

recall the time when she had not done so: knew now, long before their meeting this day, that she did so not with the regard of an old playfellow, but with the depth of her woman's love. Useless to ask how this came about; to speculate what there could be in Percy, excellent fellow as he was, to excite such a feeling. Useless to ask, to speculate thus in any case; still more in this, where the feeling had ripened with the growth of so many years! And yet, the thought to which this very feeling had now given birth, which would probably never have arisen in Alice's mind but for the jealous self-watchfulness which in her nature accompanied it, was one which involved its own utter, final hopelessness!

Involved, too, something else. The resolution that this hopelessness should be at once accepted, ungrudgingly, at any sacrifice; for the very reason that the day-dream had existed, and in exact proportion to its intensity!

Alas! how fatally misleading, both in its own origin, and in the corollary thus deduced from it! Disturbing the mental vision, the judgment and perception, with the same mournful results as in

other cases, and with characters of a less pure mould, would have followed upon self-indulgence !

But we must return to the conversation which these reflections have interrupted. When Alice replied, which she did almost in the same instant, every trace of the internal struggle we have been depicting had vanished. Her answer referred to Percy's concluding words, and look and voice were both in harmony with the genuine enthusiasm of her own reply.

‘How pretty !’ she exclaimed ; ‘how much more than pretty ! Léonie’s face is lovely I think. Not merely because it is a loveable face, which it is, but in actual artistic beauty ; any painter would be attracted by it. That fair, fair brow ; then the eyes, so soft and true, and yet with such light dancing in them ; then the ivory white of the cheek and throat, with the auburn hair clustering round it :—what could be more perfect ? I am so glad you have seen each other ; you hardly knew anything of Léonie when you were here formerly. By the way,’ continued Alice, whose warmth of speech had somewhat subsided by this time, ‘how long ago was this ?’

‘That I met Miss Léonie?’ said Percy: ‘only a few days since.’

‘That accounts for it then,’ said Alice; ‘for I have not heard from her for a fortnight nearly; I was surprised that she should not have mentioned your meeting her. Léonie is staying with an invalid aunt,’ Alice added, ‘so that she has little spare time: I dare say she will be kept in town some weeks longer. But here we are at the Vicarage.’

CHAPTER V.

MR. DELACOMBE'S sermon was completed in good time, notwithstanding the interruptions incident to Percy's avatar at Trecoed; and was duly delivered, and, as we may hope, with the appropriate results on the Sunday afternoon following.

Mr. Delacombe and the new curate, Mr. Langridge, quitted the church together when the congregation had dispersed; the afternoon work of the latter called him to a hamlet of outlying cottages at some distance, and Mr. Delacombe proffered his company for part of the way.

They had not proceeded far when they overtook a parishioner who had not been present at the recent service; who, to speak more precisely, never appeared in church at any service at all;—Sir Edgar Brereton.

Notwithstanding this defection, Sir Edgar was by no means on bad terms with his spiritual directors,

or those who should have been such : on the present occasion, he shook hands cordially with them both, and passed such comments upon the existing and impending weather as in England form either the apology for the absence of any conversation, or the basis of one which may include any given topic from theology to the price of butchers' meat.

In this instance, the weather fructified into its more profitable results. Not profitable, in the more direct sense of the term, for Mr. Delacombe would have shrunk from such an 'improvement' of the occasion even on a Sunday afternoon and with a confirmed church-goer ; but subordinately so, as extending the mental range beyond that of atmospheric observation generally.

'Percy has come back, I hear,' said Sir Edgar. Certainly not grimly, Hatty was quite right as to that ; not even with the semi-courteous patronage of squire and incumbent : he spoke pleasantly, and as if he was interested in the matter.

'Yes, two days ago,' said Mr. Delacombe. 'We shall probably have him here for some months ; he is trying for one of the new ships, and that is a matter of time and difficulty.'

‘I know it is,’ said Sir Edgar, ‘and only wish I could help him: I will if I get the chance. Percy is a fine fellow. By the way, I congratulate you.’

‘What upon?’

‘Why, on the restoration of unity and concord in the parish,’ said Sir Edgar. ‘Just before you came up, Mr. Jarratt and Mr. Meadows overtook me; walking arm-in-arm.’

‘That is Percy’s peacemaking,’ said the vicar; ‘it was his first essay on coming home. It seems his vocation somehow; as a boy, he always contrived to patch up the quarrels among the old ladies here.’

‘And now he has been trying his skill on the gentlemen,’ said Sir Edgar. ‘Well, I believe they are easier to manage: easier to understand, at any rate. Why are women so untruthful, Mr. Delacombe?’

‘Are they?’ said the vicar.

‘Of course they are. Listen to a woman in the witness-box. Try to find out from one of your own female domestics, who brought a message, or delivered a parcel, or performed any given action at any given time and place, and see the result. Per-

jury, lying, prevarication, false witness, crimination, slander, not to speak of blasphemy; at least, I suppose it is what the clergy would consider such, if the invoking the most sacred names in their calendar to witness the most trivial and wholly contradictory statements of fact comes within the meaning of the term.'

'I think you are unjust, Sir Edgar,' said Mr. Langridge, who, although he had not yet been formally introduced to the baronet, could not refrain from splintering a lance on behalf of the sex. As we have already mentioned, Mr. Langridge was an engaged man, and spoke with some natural indignation.

'How so, Mr. Langridge?' said Sir Edgar. 'I know you are a scholar and a logician; but you will need your resources in both capacities to confute me.'

We are all human, and Mr. Langridge was undoubtedly gratified by the knowledge which the baronet possessed, not only of his name, but of such mental endowments as the curate, in all humility, could not but feel himself responsible for. The

tone of his answer was accordingly considerably mollified.

‘I should not have said unjust, perhaps,’ was Mr. Langridge’s reply, ‘although of course I meant even that as a matter of argument only. But I think you have not allowed sufficient weight to some other considerations. You spoke of logic, for instance; but the logical conception of a fact is not of necessity the true one.’

‘Is it not, Mr. Langridge?’ said Sir Edgar.

‘Surely not. It is the correct mode of enunciating it, whether for the purposes of syllogism or for any other abstract statement, divested of accidental circumstances. But the true conception of the fact may include all, or many, of those circumstances.’

‘How so? I do not understand,’ said Sir Edgar.

‘Let me illustrate,’ answered his opponent. ‘You remember the earthquake in the south of England two or three years ago; one night in September, I think it was?’

‘Surely,’ said the baronet.

‘Well, next day there were some thirty letters to the Times upon the subject, which, as there were no debates and no law reports at the time, all got

printed. Twenty-nine of these letters—at any rate all of them excepting one—gave picturesque details of what had happened; complicated, more or less, according to the temperament of the writer, with extraneous matter; but still all concurring in investing the occurrence with the drapery, so to speak, of its accidents; how they were startled out of sleep, were shaken, were terrified; what they said, what they thought about it. The remaining letter, the thirtieth, if such it was, did nothing of the kind; it simply stated the fact logically:—"To the Editor of the Times. Tunbridge Wells," (or wherever it may have been;) "October—. Sir, Last night at 2.47 A.M. there was a smart shock of an earthquake here. Yours obediently, VIGILANS."

'And how does this exculpate your fair clients?' asked Sir Edgar.

'Why, just in this way, I think,' said Mr. Langridge. "'Vigilans" gave, logically, the most exact account of any of the Times' correspondents. But it was not of necessity the most truthful account; probably, it was the least so; *the* truthful account would have been that which had combined all the accidental circumstances, disencumbered of

merely personal matters, from the other twenty-nine letters. Now, from a woman's point of view, these accidents are not only an integral part of the fact, but the very essence of it; logically, they are wrong, but as a question of truth, they are quite right; and what at first sight appears to be discrepancy and error in their narration of things is, nine times out of ten, merely the statement of apparently conflicting accidents.'

'They have found a most able advocate, at any rate;' said Sir Edgar; 'I see your point, and you have put it exceedingly well. I wish Léonie was here to thank you.'

'I can assure you we echo the wish, Sir Edgar,' said Mr. Delacombe; 'we miss her sadly at the Vicarage, and indeed everywhere in the parish. Our poor people are always asking when she is expected home; she is so bright with them.'

'Bright without and bright within,' said Sir Edgar; 'no canker in that rose, happily! Curious, is it not, how people are born bad and good, or whatever the proper philosophical term may be!' He uttered these words in a moody tone, wholly different to the frank courtesy with which he had

hitherto spoken ; a singular shade passed over his face at the same time. Mr. Langridge noticed it, and thought of Hatty's phrase in their conversation a few days previously ;—‘a gloomy, dark man, as the people here call it.’ The vicar meanwhile replied to Sir Edgar's observation, as in duty bound.

‘They are only so born as regards matters of temperament, such as I was speaking of,’ he said gently ; ‘other things, motives, action, character, are under our own absolute control ; we make our choice, and must, I fear, abide the consequences.’

‘It is your office so to teach, Mr. Delacombe,’ answered Sir Edgar, ‘and I am well satisfied you believe as you teach ; but you know that is not my creed. As are wealth and poverty, as are beauty and deformity, as are success and disaster, gloom and mirthfulness, easy temper and uneasy temper, so are the moral virtues and vices, as they are foolishly called ; born and gradually developed in us, no doubt by an ethical process, at least that phrase will serve as well as any other, but wholly without our own agency. Try to establish any choice in the matter, and you will have to go much deeper ; to account for your being a High Churchman and the

incumbent of Peniston a Low Churchman ; for the causative differences between Tory and Liberal, homœopath and allopath. The star of our good and evil doing,—still to adopt those misapplied terms,—rose with us and will set with us ; like the wise men in your own sacred volume, we follow its guidance blindly ; a compulsion which we cannot resist draws us to the fore-destined end : *I speak from experience.* However,’ added the baronet, resuming his former manner, ‘I admit that I have been doing wrong now with very slight compulsion ; it is most rude of me to have been expounding my tenets to a clergyman in his own parish, and on the day when he has been professionally employed in confuting them. It is Sunday, is it not ? I think I heard the bells an hour or two since.’

What reply Mr. Delacombe might have made is uncertain ; probably, as Sir Edgar was right in saying that his views on the subject of their conversation were well known to the incumbent, it would have been as little of a combative one as the circumstances admitted. But further discussion was broken off by the arrival of another person on the spot ; Alice Brereton.

Alice had been visible to Mr. Langridge some time before she joined them; painfully visible, having regard to the particulars with which Hatty had made him acquainted, and of which he retained a full recollection. Alice had entered the road where they were standing,—for they had remained stationary during the recent conversation,—from a side-lane at a short distance. The other two gentlemen had their backs towards this; Mr. Langridge faced it, and in that position, although not in view himself, observed that Alice's first movement on coming in sight of the party was to turn hastily back with a gesture almost of terror. She did not persist in this, however; the road led immediately to the Ceniarth grounds, and some voices were audible in the lane further down, which probably alarmed her. But she walked forward with a shrinking, downcast air which smote the curate to the heart; almost involuntarily, he turned away to avoid seeing her.

And the same expression showed itself in her face, when she came up to them; the 'chilled' look, chilling as he had termed it then, which Mr. Langridge had commented upon to Hatty, but of which he

now understood the reason. Pitiably altered, indeed, from the animation with which she had met Percy two days before !

The Vicar shook hands with Alice, and introduced Mr. Langridge ; Sir Edgar took no notice of her ; he did not exhibit dislike or annoyance of any kind at her having joined them, but simply ignored her being there. The conversation however did not revert to its late topics ; the speakers, in fact, separated shortly afterwards, Sir Edgar inviting both gentlemen to dine with him that evening. ‘ I shall be alone,’ he said, ‘ as my sister-in-law and Léonie are both from home, so it will be a charity in you to come ; and I will undertake to deliver no further homilies.’

Mr. Langridge, however, had parish duties, and the vicar declined also ; so the invitation fell to the ground. Sir Edgar returned home to dine ‘ alone,’ and returned alone also. Doubly alone, because, physically speaking, he had a companion during his return, as in fact he would have for the dinner also !

But it was dreary companionship.

He held the lodge-gate open for Alice as they en-

tered the grounds, which were close at hand ; shut it behind her, and then walked along the carriage-drive by her side. But no conversation passed between father and daughter ; none perceptible to the two clergymen who stood watching them. Once Alice seemed to venture timidly on some remark, which Sir Edgar answered ; then he relapsed into silence again.

‘ Poor girl ; poor Alice ! ’ exclaimed Mr. Delacombe with much emotion, as they disappeared round a corner of the road.

The phrase was the same which Hatty had used in speaking of Alice, Mr. Langridge recollected. He could not forbear referring to what had then passed.

‘ I have heard something of the facts,’ he said, ‘ but only in outline. My informant was Miss Delacombe, which precluded my enquiring further at the time, at least as to one main part of the story ; and I have not cared to ask questions elsewhere. But I am certainly curious to know more.’

‘ I will walk on with you,’ said the vicar, ‘ and we can talk it over *en route* : of course, I should not do so with everyone, but I can trust your discretion. The subject itself is most interesting to me ; Alice

Brereton has my warmest sympathy, as indeed her own lavish sympathy for others deserves.'

'Miss Delacombe spoke of her unselfishness,' said the curate.

'I hardly know that that is the word,' said Mr. Delacombe; 'it is strictly true, but it is not enough. There is a good deal of unselfishness which is very admirable, but not very loveable.'

'Too objective, perhaps?' suggested Mr. Langridge; 'its exercise becomes uncomfortably prominent?'

'Perhaps so,' said his companion. 'At any rate, that is not Alice. She simply throws herself into what is going on, joy equally with sorrow, as if it were her own matter; identifies herself with you; just, as I said, perfect sympathy. However, I did not mean to discuss Alice, but to tell you her history, poor girl. Her mother, Lady Brereton, eloped from Ceniarth.'

'I gathered something to that effect,' said the curate. 'I am afraid from its results upon Sir Edgar that it was a bad case.'

'In one sense it was,' said Mr. Delacombe; 'bad from the poor woman's own folly, and the wickedness

which practised upon it. But it wanted one ingredient of evil, I am thankful to say; no criminality of any kind beyond the mere act itself, the mere quitting her husband's house, that is, was ever chargeable upon her; that has never been questioned. And even that deplorable act was instantly and bitterly repented of.'

'Poor thing!' said Mr. Langridge. 'What was her motive for such folly?'

'An old story enough as far as that goes,' said the vicar. 'She was a light-hearted creature; not unlike the girl Sir Edgar has adopted, the one they call Léonie, only without the principle and strong sense which the latter has; in fact, Léonie is at heart, with a good many faults, a clever, valuable girl. Poor Lady Brereton was the reverse.'

'A purely superficial character, you mean?' asked the curate,

'Yes,' said Mr. Delacombe. 'Under other circumstances she might have passed through life creditably enough; but those in which she was placed just developed the weak points in her. Her marriage with Sir Edgar was unfortunate, to begin with. He doted upon her in his first attachment;

then, when this wore off, and the shallowness of her nature was brought into daily contrast with his own, his affection had nothing to fasten itself upon. He was too just to allow her to suffer from this in any direct way ; but it preyed upon his own mind ; made him, what he was always predisposed to be, gloomy, taciturn, withdrawn into himself ; the very reverse of her. Everything, in fact, seemed to separate them. Sir Edgar is a man of education and thought ; Lady Brereton's literary pursuits, so far as she had any, were confined to the most trashy magazine reading. Then, again, she had been much abroad, and had continental tastes and habits ; he was wedded to English life : she was never happy unless in society, and the more frivolous the better ; he, with few exceptions, disliked and shunned it. Of course, although this might have led to unhappiness, it did not of itself involve danger. The latter arose from Lady Brereton's personal attractions ; she was exceedingly pretty.'

'Like the young lady who has just left us ?' asked Mr. Langridge.

'No ; very different, I believe,' said the vicar ;
'I never saw her myself, for the matter took place

before I came to Trecoed, twenty years ago now ; but most of the people here recollect her. No, the mother's beauty corresponded to her character ; surface only ; Alice takes after her father, although with the features infinitely softened. However, Lady Brereton was always admired, and just when things were at the worst, a former admirer appeared on the scene ; a cousin of her own, I believe. He was a thorough scoundrel, as far as his own designs went, and took the ordinary means to prosecute them, although happily,—or in one sense happily,—without success.'

'You said she eloped with him,' said Mr. Langridge.

'Yes,' said the vicar, 'but the circumstances in this respect were not those of the old story. She found Ceniarth unquestionably *triste* ; Sir Edgar was much away from home ; she lacked companionship, such as she had been accustomed to, and this man supplied it. They were often together, wholly without blame on her part, beyond that of indiscretion, but with a good deal of comment from without ; and this went on, the husband, as usual, being the last person to hear of the *dedecus*

domús. But it did at length reach even his ears.'

'And he acted sternly enough, I dare say,' said Mr. Langridge.

'So sternly, that the elopement took place three days afterwards. If such a thing can ever be innocent this was. Lady Brereton had passed the three days by his orders in solitary confinement; when the proposal of flight was made to her, she accepted it as a child might; as a simple escape from duress. But the seducer had misconceived the character with which he had to deal. When Lady Brereton reached the place of rendezvous, which she did in the forenoon, she had her maid with her: child-like, again, she had arranged this as a matter of course. I won't dwell upon what ensued, although it was guileless enough. Some angry words arose; Lady Brereton's spirit, for she had spirit under the surface-character, rose under the provocation; a revulsion of feeling took place, and she quitted the place of meeting—the tempter and the temptation, so far as they had ever been such—the same afternoon.'

'And what ensued?' asked Mr. Langridge.

'The saddest part of the story, in my judgment,'

said Mr. Delacombe, 'and I am not one to make light of such errors. When his wife's flight was discovered the same morning, Sir Edgar shut himself up in his library: Alice, then little more than a year old, was in her nursery all day; the domestics went about their ordinary avocations; one or two neighbours, who were on intimate terms, called to see if they could be of any use, my predecessor in the living among the rest, but no one was admitted. Late in the afternoon, her maid returned, detailing the particulars as above. Still later, as it drew towards dusk, Lady Brereton came back herself.'

'And was mercilessly received, I understand,' said the curate.

'Most mercilessly: it was a terrible scene. He had been brooding over the matter all day in solitude, and was not himself; at least, I hope not. I do not mean that the mind was unhinged in any sense, but something seemed to come over him, something which the people here have a good deal to say about, if one would listen to them; a kind of possession, so to speak. At any rate, he acted like a person possessed.'

'Did their meeting take place in public?' Mr. Langridge asked.

‘No,’ said the vicar; ‘not strictly: two or three of the upper domestics were present, as well as Sir Edgar’s solicitor, whom he had sent for from Swansea, and who had just arrived. Lady Brereton stole into the hall in the dusk; and it was some time before she was seen, and her arrival announced to Sir Edgar. He then at once came down to her, and these persons were present; all others had been ordered to withdraw. But there is no doubt about the facts.’

‘Did Lady Brereton speak to him?’

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Delacombe, ‘spoke or sobbed; words of deep, heartfelt contrition. She told everything, without reserve; admitted her whole weakness, her whole misdoing; extenuated nothing, advanced no claim for forbearance. The only thing she did assert was her still absolute innocence; more than innocence, her heart-loyalty, which, under all her errors, she assured her husband was still his.’

‘And Sir Edgar?’

‘He answered her quite calmly,’ said Mr. Delacombe: ‘I cannot vouch for the actual words, but they were cruel ones, at any rate. He addressed her as “Lady Brereton;” the law still gave her that

title, he said, and might continue to do so ; he should not seek to deprive her of it. “ Whether you are innocent or not,” he went on, “ is wholly immaterial ; for the present purpose, I will assume you are. Keep your married name, if you will ; your food and raiment will be secured to you ; and you will enjoy one remaining privilege which the law gives you—your life : if I could take it as you stand here before me, I should do so without remorse or scruple ! Go, and live, as you will and where you will ; only, it will not be here. Our clergy will tell you of the gates of Paradise being barred against such as you are ; and granting there is another world, as they call it, I think this highly probable ; but, at all events, the gates of Ceniarth will be. If you were to crouch in the dust and mire before me, to beseech me by the child you have given birth to, by the love—faugh !—which my folly once lavished upon you, by God and by nature, by your death-agony and my own, you should not come back here ; not re-enter the house you have disgraced. Go, woman !”

‘ And she went ?’ asked Mr. Langridge.

‘ Yes. Whether she might have compelled Sir

Edgar to take her home I cannot say ; at any rate, she did not try : a restoration to her position in society was hopeless, and if she had forced herself back to Ceniarth, Sir Edgar would at once have left it ; that she knew well enough.'

'What did she do, then?'

'Left the house on foot, as she had returned to it,' said Mr. Delacombe: 'numerous proffers of aid were made her, but she declined them all. She did not even claim, what I believe would have been allowed her at law, the custody of her infant ; she may have thought it useless ; at all events, no public steps were taken. In fact, since that evening Lady Brereton has totally disappeared ; gone nobody knows whither ; it was surmised, to her own family, but this was mere conjecture. The secret, so far as it was one, was faithfully kept at the time, and now it has long since ceased to possess any general interest ; the matter is past and gone, except for its consequences to poor Alice.'

'Those I gathered very painfully from what Miss Delacombe told me,' said Mr. Langridge. 'There was a further point, however, as to which your daughter excited my curiosity, but which I did

not like to press her upon: I mean, what she called the family character in Sir Edgar; this ruthlessness of his. Inherited, she said it was; derived from the father and grandfather, at all events, and apparently dating still earlier.'

'She spoke quite truly,' said Mr. Delacombe energetically. He checked himself, however, in the next moment, and added in some confusion, 'I mean, she told you what the people hereabouts say. Of course she has no personal knowledge about it, and I am sure that I have none; in fact, Hatty is probably the best authority of the two. The subject is one which has a special fascination for young ladies; just the sort of thing they get talking over together on winter evenings by the fireside; as good as a ghost-story, only there are no ghosts in it.'

'I had no idea that it involved any legendary element,' said Mr. Langridge.

'Not precisely legendary,' answered the vicar, 'although it has been transmitted from mouth to mouth for years past, and probably has lost nothing in the process. However, I believe the main facts are true; they date from the middle of the last century. The then baronet,—I hardly know how many gene-

rations back he stood in the line of descent,—perpetrated, I fear, a dark crime. The details were never ascertained; if they had been, of course he would have been brought to justice: but there was no one who cared to do this. There was the strongest suspicion, so strong and persistent, that it was impossible to believe it was not based on fact; but there it rested; the perpetrator was exceedingly popular; the act had a kind of rude justice about it: altogether it was hushed up. Never forgotten, as you may hear from our villagers to this hour, but passing, even in the lifetime of the person mainly implicated, into the stage of practical immunity from its consequences.'

'And the act itself,' said Mr. Langridge; 'the crime you speak of; it was—'

'Bloodshed,' said the vicar, completing his companion's sentence; 'assassination, deliberately planned and ruthlessly, although strangely, executed. You shall hear. I do not know if you have discovered that the road we are now following to the hamlet is not the only way there; that there is one much shorter, at least from your lodgings?'

'You mean the footpath through Ceniarth?' said Mr. Langridge; 'yes, I found that out some days

since: I did not follow it up, but I saw that I should save distance by it. It crosses a bridge on the other side of Ceniarth House, between that and the village.'

'It does,' said the vicar; 'and it is with that bridge that the popular tale is connected; heaven knows whether truly or not. It seems that the baronet of whom I spoke just now, three or four back from Sir Edgar, made considerable alterations in the place; the person entrusted with the superintendence of these was an architect and landscape-gardener, as the phrase then went;—an Italian. The story is singularly like that which I have recently told you, although with one important difference; so like it, that it is difficult to shake off the superstitious feeling which in the popular belief hereabouts connects the results of the two together.'

'The then Lady Brereton played a part in the tragedy of that date, you mean?' asked the curate.

'Yes,' said Mr. Delacombe; 'and hers was an undoubtedly culpable one. She got thrown with this man;—she was an Italian herself, or had been much in Italy, I know not which;—undue intimacy resulted, and the unhappy woman fell, atoning her

fall shortly afterwards by suicide ;—little use to go into the wretched details. What is material in the story is the fate of the paramour, this Italian. If the tradition of more than a hundred years speaks true, he lies buried under one of the piers of that bridge.'

'Good heaven!' exclaimed the curate; 'how was that effected?'

'The bridge was building at that time,' said Mr. Delacombe; 'previously there had been only some planks with a hand-rail. These were constantly being washed away, and amongst the other improvements then going on it was decided to replace these with a stone structure; the foundations had just been dug when the circumstance to which I have referred took place. The husband thirsted for revenge, and if the story is to be believed, he found the means of obtaining it. The superintendent was unpopular as a foreigner, and overbearing to the workmen as well; and when the baronet's passion was at its fiercest, one of the latter proposed to him to put the Italian out of the way.'

'And the offer was accepted?'

'So they say,' answered the vicar. 'Another man

was taken into the plot, and between them they induced their victim, who was not aware that his guilt was discovered, to examine the excavation for one of the piers before laying the first stone. He did so without suspicion ; and the stone, which was ready to be lowered, and, like all the blocks employed in the bridge, was large and massive, was then dropped upon him.'

'What a horrible fate!' said the curate. 'But do you think, Mr. Delacombe, this is really true?'

'I cannot tell,' said his companion. 'The Italian unquestionably disappeared from that date ; and it is equally well known that the two labourers left the country soon after and never returned, although rumour spoke of money pressure being put upon the then baronet from time to time. He did not survive many years ; and happily now there is no one whom the crime, if it was really perpetrated, can affect in its direct consequences.'

'Direct consequences?'

Mr. Delacombe's reply was again made with some embarrassment of manner. 'It was foolish in me to have used the term,' he said ; 'you must think you have come into a parish of gossiping old

women. The only excuse I can make is that after hearing a thing for twenty years one gets into the narrators' modes of speech, and, I suppose, into their modes of thought also. Somehow I cannot shake off the feeling, with which every man, woman, and child in the parish is imbued, that the act of which I have spoken was committed; and that it has left a sort of inheritance of evil-doing in the family.'

'Bad men, as well as merciless, Miss Delacombe told me Sir Edgar's father and grandfather both were,' answered Mr. Langridge.

'Yes,' said the vicar; 'but their badness was not that of vice only; it was crime, dark crime, in both cases; the facts as to them, at any rate, are beyond controversy. Their characters were very different, but the same fatal tendency to revolt against human enactment as well as divine which other men, no less morally depraved than they were, go through life without developing, showed itself in both; and, in both, associated with this further element—this remorselessness. I must not give you particulars, for we are near the end of our walk; indeed, they are too painful for me to dwell upon. The main facts, however, are brief enough. The grandfather

was an utter profligate ; in early life he ran through whatever he had to spend, and then took to gambling as a profession, for some time, I believe, with fair success. His career, however, was short-lived. He frequented the Baden tables principally ; there, one day, when he had staked a larger sum than usual, the luck turned against him, and he lost his whole winnings, and all he possessed into the bargain. His rage at this was so ungovernable that, on the winner quitting the room, he laid wait for him where he could do so unobserved, and stabbed him to the heart, escaping justice himself by taking poison.'

'And the father?' asked Mr. Langridge.

'He was a dissolute, bad man also, like his predecessor,' said the vicar ; 'quite as bad in reality, although not so openly ; externally, his life was decorous enough. He broke the heart of his first wife, Sir Edgar's mother, a most admirable woman ; then he paid his addresses to a young lady in the neighbourhood, who refused him ; I do not know that she would have married him in any case, but in fact her affections were engaged elsewhere, and Sir James, that was his name, ascertained this from

her by direct enquiry, and also elicited from her the name of his rival ; the latter was young like herself, the son of a gentleman of good position in Swansea. The instant he had done so, the " Brereton devil," as the people here call it, seemed to come upon him. He invited the young man to dinner next day ; made him drink to an extent just short of intoxication ; then fastened some quarrel upon him, ending in blows. The result was that a meeting was fixed for the morning following, before there was time for apology or reflection. The poor young fellow, who had probably never handled a pistol in his life, and was still stupefied with his recent excess, came with his second ; Sir James, who was a notoriously good shot, came with his. The young man fired in the air ; Sir James took deliberate aim, and his antagonist fell dead on the spot.'

' But was this tolerated ?' asked Mr. Langridge.

' Certainly not,' said his companion ; ' it was too atrocious a case even for the then license of duelling. Both the seconds had to fly, as well as Sir James himself ; and he, at all events, never returned to England ; he died while his son, Sir Edgar, was still a minor.'

‘But Sir Edgar himself, Miss Delacombe tells me, is a man of blameless life and reputation,’ said the curate; ‘the very reverse of his two immediate ancestors.’

‘The very reverse of them,’ said Mr. Delacombe; ‘as far, that is, as reputation and blameless life go; both these are unquestionable. How far he resembles the family in other particulars of which we have spoken, you can judge for yourself.’

‘Only too easily, I fear. By the way, I infer from what passed just now that Sir Edgar is a sceptic?’

‘An infidel, rather,’ said Mr. Delacombe; ‘scepticism implies some degrees of doubt, but he has none. That phase of his character, as far as I can gather, is the result of Lady Brereton’s unhappy act. Of course, I do not know what he may have been really at heart before, but up to that time he was externally a churchman; attended the services, and so on. He continued to do so, or rather resumed the practice, for the four Sundays after I came to the living; I hardly know why; perhaps it was the strong sense of justice he has, as if it were incumbent upon him to give religion a fair

chance in new hands. At any rate, his manner was most decorous, even exemplary. The first Sunday, on coming out, I enquired the name of that grave gentlemanly man, who paid such marked attention to everything! However, he gave up church-going after the fourth week, and, I fear, has never entered any place of worship since.'

'Does he oppose you in the parish?' asked the curate.

'Not in the least,' said Mr. Delacombe; 'on the contrary, as far as pecuniary assistance goes, he is our warm supporter; gives liberally for all parochial objects, and even subscribed handsomely for the church restoration. As you see, too, he puts no force on his own family; the two girls come to church whenever they like, and the servants do the same: he seems wholly without thought or desire of imposing his own sentiments on others. Only, there they are for himself: utter disbelief. He reveres nothing, hopes nothing, fears nothing.'

'He is a fatalist, however, I gather,' said Mr. Langridge.

'Yes,' said Mr. Delacombe; 'I ought to have excepted that: fate, or destiny, or some overruling

force of the kind, he does believe in. Should any great calamity ever happen ; anything in which this cruel, vindictive assertion of right,—for that is the shape which the morbid temperament he has inherited will assume in his case,—leads to results even more irremediable than it has already done, this fatalist creed of his will be a main element in it. But now I must wish you good day.'

CHAPTER VI.

ON his return from the hamlet at a later hour the same afternoon, Mr. Langridge's thoughts were engrossed by the professional work in which he had been engaged, and did not for some time revert to his conversation with the vicar. As he pursued his way, however, following the short path through Ceniarth grounds of which he had spoken, Mr. Langridge found, before he was aware of it, that he had reached the bridge with which, if report spoke correctly, so much crime and misery in the past had been connected. It had fallen dusk, and the semi-ruinous masonry, the state of which quite bore out Roger Beynon's comments, hung in crumbling masses, the water lying in dark pools beneath them. As the curate's eye took in these features, Mr. Delacombe's narrative recurred to him with lively interest.

'Here, then,' he thought, 'if an apparently well-authenticated tradition be true, lie the remains of


that wretched man; done to death in his unrepented guilt by an act itself no less criminal! And how singular is the popular belief connected with the latter; the belief in the fatal legacy bequeathed to the descendants of the perpetrator of this act of bloodshed; the "Brereton devil," as the Vicar called it;—the *alastor*! Yes, it is exactly what the Greeks meant by that; they believed, and it was one of the most deeply-rooted of their moral credences, that guilt, unexpiated guilt, brought this haunting spirit, this *alastor*, into a family, urging each successive generation to new crimes. Strange that the Gower peasantry should have reproduced the idea!

‘And is it an erroneous one?’ Mr. Langridge continued, still pursuing his reflections. ‘There is no inherited compulsion to evil-doing, of course; that would be only another version of Sir Edgar’s fatalism; but there may be the inherited temptation to it! We know very little how temptation comes; who are the specific agents in it; what the nature and origin of the power they exert in any particular instance. Nothing illogical in believing that one man is subjected to an ordeal far more severe, whether in degree or kind, than others are; and that the cause

of his being so subjected is, in the mysterious chain of causation, something done or omitted by those who have gone before him. Quite conceivable, that the Breretons may in fact have their alastor ; something which prompts, although it does not necessitate or excuse, all this guilt and wretchedness. Even Sir Edgar’

The train of thought in which Mr. Langridge had been engaged had so much interested him that he had unconsciously spoken the last sentence or two aloud ; pausing, while he did so, at the extremity of the bridge which he had just crossed, and leaning one hand upon the stone pier in which it terminated. As he pronounced the baronet’s name, however, he became aware that he was not alone there.

The bridge, although formed of wooden planking in the centre, was continued at each end upon arches of some height, constructed to allow the free passage of the water in flood-time. Under the nearest of these arches Mr. Langridge now fancied he heard a rustling sound of some kind. In the next instant a figure stepped forward out of the obscurity of the recess by which it had been concealed, and Mr. Langridge at once recognized Alice Brereton. He commenced a



somewhat confused apology, but Alice interrupted him.

‘It is I who have to ask pardon,’ she said, ‘for being an involuntary eavesdropper upon you: I walked over again to the village before dinner to see an old nurse of mine, which made me late back here, and in the dusk I saw some one coming along the footpath who I thought was my fa . . . I mean,’ said Alice, checking herself, and speaking confusedly in her turn, ‘I thought I would get under the cover of the arch while—while the person passed, whoever it was.’

Had the evening been less advanced Mr. Langridge would have observed the deep flush which rose to Alice’s temples as she said this. He did notice how her voice trembled, and could not forbear recalling their previous meeting that afternoon, and the manner in which she had then shrunk from joining Sir Edgar. Alice soon recovered herself, however, and said gently, ‘I hope you will not feel any vexation at what you were saying; the family history to which you referred is only too well known. I would not have startled you by showing myself, only I thought that perhaps I

might be obliged to do so after all, and then you would think I ought to have stopped you earlier; before you had spoken about . . . him, I mean. Mr. Langridge?' Alice added in a tone of enquiry.

'Yes, Miss Brereton?'

'I have a question which I very much wish to ask; may I do so?'

'I will gladly answer it if I can,' said the curate, who was a man of kindly nature, and whose sympathies had been powerfully enlisted on his companion's behalf that afternoon. 'As to my foolish words,' he added, 'I am so much ashamed of them that I shall be most grateful if you will enable me to say anything which may efface them from your memory.'

'They were not foolish,' said Alice; 'they seem to have given me the key to something which I have often pondered over without being able to comprehend it. What I wanted to ask was in reference to it; to this special temptation which you think may attend particular people from causes beyond their own control; causes dating from some unhappy act or series of acts in their own past, or even in that of others. You say you do consider this a possible thing?'

‘My speculations were very crude,’ said her companion, ‘but certainly it does seem to me intelligible that guilt should be transmitted in this way; should entail, as part of its punishment, a tendency to repeat itself, if I may so speak; some liability over and above the ordinary temptations with which we are beset. But my dear Miss Brereton,’ he added, ‘as you have compelled me to say thus much, you must allow me to add a corollary to it. Be the temptation what it may, the means of mastering it are always within our reach; those who use them properly need be under no apprehension. If I may speak for one moment with a personal reference, I would say that, if this is the case with anyone, it is with yourself. I am no stranger to your character, and it warrants me, both as your clergyman and as one considerably your senior in age, in giving you every assurance I can upon this head; you, at all events, are treading the path of safety, humbly and steadily. Whatever vague terrors may belong under other conditions to the matters of which we have spoken, you at least may dismiss them, and I urge you to do so.’


‘I cannot, I cannot,’ said Alice, speaking with the

deepest emotion. 'Oh! Mr. Langridge, if at the Litany or at any other time you think of those who are very wretched, pray for me and mine; for me especially. I am so very, very unhappy.'

'I will certainly do as you wish,' said Mr. Langridge, speaking even more gently than before. 'I am aware,' he added, 'that you have many causes for sorrow; causes which I hardly like to refer to more explicitly, but with which all who know you, even imperfectly as I do, must deeply sympathise.'

Alice was silent for a minute; then she replied, 'I know of course what you refer to; thank you for your kind mention of it. But the sorrow I speak of is something different, something wholly within myself. I am so undisciplined; find myself rebelling against what I know is the course of duty so wilfully and passionately at times, that I tremble when I reflect upon it; tremble as to what it may mean. Mr. Langridge, do you think it means what—what you spoke of just now; the scourge of our family coming upon me? It would be terrible; it was about this I wished to ask you.'

'But you do not give way to these passionate feelings?' said the curate.



‘Oh! no,’ answered Alice; ‘that would indeed be frightful. But I cannot force them back; cannot prevent them coming; and I so fear, that with this evil taint in me they may one day get the mastery; that I may be the next of our unhappy house to commit some great act of wickedness. I hardly know how I have been able to speak of this,’ Alice added; ‘but so many chords of painful thought in the past were touched by what I accidentally overheard you saying!’

‘I hope this may be less the case in future,’ said Mr. Langridge. ‘If such an external influence as we have just spoken of is ever permitted to take hold of an individual it must be when he or she has given it some advantage; has welcomed, not resisted, its first impulses. If I may venture to give you any counsel, my dear Miss Brereton, it is on a very different score. I think you should be on your guard against a habit which sometimes leads to mischief; that of over-conscientiousness.’


‘There is small fear of that,’ said Alice.

‘I am not so sure,’ answered the clergyman; ‘even from the little I have now seen of you. People’s difficulties, moral or mental, lie in various direc-

tions ; but one undoubted quarter from which they are to be apprehended is the exaggeration of something which in itself is good and right. Pray pardon my suggesting this.'

'It needs no pardon,' said Alice ; 'I am only too grateful to you for having listened to me so patiently. But I must hurry home myself now ; there is the first bell.'

'How little we can read each others' hearts,' was Alice's reflection when she retired to her room that night. 'How wrongly does Mr. Langridge, with all his observation of character, judge of mine ! "Over-conscientiousness !" what cruel irony in the word, as applied to my wretched self ! Could he have known the thoughts with which my mind has been occupied since the day before yesterday, he would have thought little warning necessary on that score ! Mind ; yes, and heart too ! That wicked feeling that I hated Léonie ; yes, hated her, from the very moment that I heard from Percy of their having met ; of his being so struck with her. But I will thrust the feeling from me ; crush it as I would the



viper that was coiling round my feet ; it shall not take this hold of me. We Breretons have a strong will, they say ; I suppose we have ; at any rate, I will exert it now. What have I to do with Percy in any case ? Does he love me, could he ever do so, in any event, as I love him ; as I felt when we met two days since that I always have loved him, all through these years of separation ; loved him from childhood to girlhood and from girlhood to womanhood ? No, indeed : he will be joining some ship soon, be absent for another ten years, and then, when he comes back, forget my face and name altogether :—ridiculous folly ! And yet, knowing all this, to feel as I did because he admired somebody else ; and that somebody Léonie ! Dear, dear Léonie ; to think that I could thus have wronged you, even in idea ; have had this jealous, wicked temper against you ! If any act of mine can ever atone for it, it shall.’

It was several hours before Alice could compose herself to rest. When she at length did so, the subject on which her thoughts had so recently turned remained still present to her ; but substituting, as is often the case with the capricious images of sleep, the feelings on which our reflections have been

originally based, for the result produced by the intellectual and moral process which they have since undergone.

Often Alice woke from her uneasy slumber, feverish and excited, and striving to recall, as the mind does on recovering its control of the other faculties, the ideas with which they have been jointly engaged during the interval. And as often as she did so, one cadence of sound still reproduced itself as embodying these ;—‘ He loves her ; loves Léonie !’



CHAPTER VII.

‘I SAY, Hatty, it’s jolly weather,’ said Percy Delacombe at breakfast one morning, a few days after his return to the Vicarage; ‘let’s have a pic-nic somewhere.’

‘Oh! Percy, yes,’ said Hatty, forgetting in her delight at the suggestion that she had the tap of the urn turned on, and only awaking to the fact when the teapot had overflowed, and the scalding water was already descending in an inverted geyser upon the carpet.

‘Hatty, what are you about?’ said Mr. Delacombe, hastily laying down a letter which he had been reading, and withdrawing his near leg from the cataract.

‘Please forgive me, papa, I am so sorry,’ said Hatty. ‘Who shall it be, Percy?’

‘If you can’t make tea properly, Hatty, you might as well talk grammar,’ said Percy. ‘But never

mind, Hat ; it's like the geography we were speaking of the other day, and the other governess's lessons. Why don't you try and get them abolished ? you will have votes soon, you know, and then you can do what you like.'

'But what shall we learn instead ?' said Hatty.

'Why, something that will really exercise your brains ; not mere faggots of things, cut-and-dried questions, which you get up one morning by rote, and forget the next.'

'No, we don't,' said Hatty, indignantly.

'Yes, you do,' said Percy. 'I saw the two Car-ruther girls the other day, who wouldn't be above twenty if they were the Siamese twins—'

'The Siamese twins ?'

'Yes, counting them both together, I mean. Well, they were copying a lot about Bolivia ; there was the question, "What are the natural features, population, mines, manufactures and exports of Bolivia ?" and there was the answer underneath, chapter and verse, which they were writing out. What was the use of that, I should like to know ? I say, Hatty, run out and call her, quick ; I don't like to myself ; make haste.'

‘Call who?’ said Hatty, whose attitude of instant obedience probably averted some further criticism on her grammar.

‘Why, Alice, of course; she passed down the lane just as I was speaking. She will hear you from the lawn.’

Like Yamen, Hatty did as she was bid, and Alice was captured accordingly. Now that the result was attained, however, Percy, after the occasional fashion of captors, seemed rather embarrassed with his prize; especially as Hatty, who had little genius for keeping anything in the background, at once apprised their visitor that she had been summoned by Percy’s desire.

‘I wanted you to come and arrange about a pic-nic, please, Miss Brereton,’ said Percy meekly, with some consciousness of a divergence from the lines of exact truth-telling in this utterance.

‘I will contribute my assistance, if required,’ said Alice, who spoke and looked so brightly this morning as to shew no indications of the depression which the face might be thought to wear at other times. She seemed determined that the feeling with which she had reproached herself in reference to Léonie

should receive, in act and word at any rate, the most direct negation possible. 'I have no special gifts for organising pic-nics, or anything else,' Alice added, 'but I will try. Who are the party to be?'

'That is exactly what I wanted to settle, Miss Brereton,' said Percy.

'You might as well call her Alice after all these years, I think,' was an interpellation which rose to the lips of the downright Hatty at this moment; but something which she could not exactly define kept them unpronounced:—something which once or twice during the subsequent conversation made her look furtively at Alice, with a puzzled expression on her own face. At present, in lieu of the words which had thus come uppermost, she reverted to the pic-nic question.

'I beg to observe,' she said, 'that Percy has only developed this idea since breakfast began. Where do you intend us to go to, Percy?'

'That is for you and Miss Brereton to decide: if she will really come,' said Percy. 'The Worm's Head would do capitally; I should like to see the old place again.'

'I never have seen it,' said Hatty; 'not that

dreadful rock itself: I am half frightened at it, but I should like to go there too. Who is to come with us; besides Alice, I mean?’

‘I don’t quite know,’ said Percy, considering; ‘we can get lots of girls, of course, but I am afraid there are no gentlemen: Lindsay would be the only chance, and he is in Jersey with an Oxford reading-party; I heard from him the other day. It will be dreadfully slow for you, Miss Brereton, with only my stupid self; I didn’t think of that.’

‘I shall survive it, I daresay,’ said Alice; so gaily, and so little in character with her usual manner in all respects, that Hatty directed towards her one of those looks of which we have spoken. ‘Besides,’ she added, ‘I shall protect myself. What do you say to asking Helen Lindsay, Hatty? she will keep us alive at all events, whatever apprehensions Mr. Delacombe may entertain as to his own dullness.’

‘What are you saying about me, Alice?’ asked the Vicar, who had been engaged in the perusal of his letters while this dialogue was in progress, and now looked up from the last sheet.

‘Nothing at all about you, Mr. Delacombe,’ said Alice; ‘Mr. Percy was expressing some morbid sen-


timents in reference to himself, which I was endeavouring to combat in the way in which such things are best combated with gentlemen, by endorsing them.'

As Alice spoke, the Vicar directed towards her a look which expressed qualitatively, although in a lower degree, something of the surprise which Hatty had shown. He laughed at the same time, however.

'You are quoting the "Spectator," Alice,' he said; 'I hardly gave you credit for knowing it so well.'

'I fear I must disclaim the praise,' said Alice; 'what was I quoting?'

'Why, the story of the sceptical writer who was attacked with typhus, or whatever they had in those days. Believing himself to be in extremities he sent for a member of my own profession, and, amongst other acts of penitence, reproached himself for the publication of certain deistical treatises, which, if it were only in his power, he would, he said, at once withdraw from circulation. Seeing him thus troubled, his adviser assured him that his distress was needless, as he did not believe anybody had ever read one of the books in question: whereupon the sick



man, who, in Addison's own words, "was cut to the heart by these consolations," ordered his visitor's carriage, and recovered his health immediately. But what are you all talking of; why don't you ask Alice to have some breakfast?'

'We were waiting for you to finish your story, papa,' said Percy.

'I see, Master Percy, you are as impudent as ever,' said his father.

'Oh! but really, Mr. Delacombe,' Alice interposed, 'I breakfasted long ago.'

'Yes,' said the Vicar; 'and now you are looking at me as you did that afternoon when you called me a tyrant. You see I have not forgotten that, Alice.'

A deep blush overspread Alice's face, for, as she knew, Percy had not forgotten this either. She recurred to the Worm's Head party as the most available refuge under the circumstances; still with the altered voice and manner which had attracted the notice of two of the present party.

'Is it to be Helen, then?' she asked.

'I am quite agreeable,' said Percy.

'And I am sure that I am,' said Hatty, who saw some advantage to a purpose very near to her heart

in the arrangement of a quartette thus constituted. 'The pony-carriage will take us nicely,' she added; 'as far as Rhosilly, that is. What day shall it be, Percy?'

'Any day you like,' said Percy; 'say Thursday; to-morrow I must go into Swansea to Admiral Lygon's; I have made an appointment with him; but Thursday . . .'

'Stop,' said Mr. Delacombe; 'here is a message I ought to have given you.' As the Vicar spoke, he took up the letters he had just been perusing.

'From grandpapa Marriott, is it not?' asked Hatty.

'Yes, my dear: and Lennox is coming over here on Wednesday or Thursday, if it holds fine; he is not quite sure which; he asked me to tell Percy, if he was at home. Lennox is coming in the yacht, with some young friend of his.'

'Charley Roper, no doubt,' said Percy; 'that will be first-rate. Bother Admiral Lygon: but I can't help that now. If they don't come to-morrow, though, it will be supremely jolly; we will drive to Rhosilly, as you said, Hatty, and then have out one of the boats there, and meet them half way. You don't mind, do you, Miss Brereton?'

‘Thank you,’ said Hatty, interposing, ‘but I do: I had a sail in Rhosilly bay once, and I never intend to try a second time. You and Alice can go, if you like, and there will be Helen to keep you company.’

‘We had better all go on to the Worm’s Head, as first proposed, I think,’ said Alice; ‘Helen, I know, is a very bad sailor, and I cannot say much for my own capabilities. If Mr. Delacombe sees the yacht coming he can leave us, and sail out to meet it: I am an efficient guide to any part of the Worm’s Head.’

‘Don’t expose yourselves to any danger, my dears,’ said Mr. Delacombe, looking up from the current number of the “Edinburgh,” which he had just substituted for his letter; for the vicar always read at breakfast time.

‘No, papa,’ said Hatty. ‘Percy, I am so glad that we have arranged for Helen Lindsay to come; I think Lennox is rather fond of her; he danced with her several times at the county ball last winter.’

‘My sister has a quick eye for anything like a flirtation, Miss Brereton,’ said Percy, ‘as probably you know; she always detects it in the very bud.’

She would be invaluable to Mr. Pollaky at the Private Enquiry Office.'

'Why to Mr. Pollaky?' asked Alice.

'Why, he advertises "Addresses discovered;" I saw it the other day. Not that Hatty is malicious with her discoveries; quite the contrary; she would rather do mischief the other way, try and help on things too fast in her spirit of match-making.'

'In her spirit of good-nature, I should say,' said Alice.

'Well, perhaps it is so,' said Percy, who was intensely proud of his sister: 'still, for all that, she would not be safe; those sort of things require so much management. If Hatty saw two people whom she thought suited to each other, and who seemed to think so themselves, she would suggest an immediate mutual understanding, as if they were emigrants just going out.'

'People do emigrate when they go through that process,' said Alice, who was quite at home enough at the Vicarage to pursue aloud any train of thought which occurred to her.

'Ah! yes, I see how you mean, Miss Delacombe,' said Percy, whose matter-of-fact organism, however,

had required a momentary interval to arrive at the perception: 'that is where I am so stupid, and you are so poetical. I wonder how many girls that one knows would think of it in that way.'

'If you had not interrupted her,' said Mr. Delacombe, 'Alice would have gone on with her speculations; she knows how much I like to hear them.'

'You give my nonsense far too much encouragement,' said Alice; 'and I am sure it will not make up for the page on cotton manufacture which I see you were reading. I only meant what is commonplace enough; how wide a gulf people must cross when they come to that mutual understanding we just heard of. From a woman's point of view it seems infinite: not merely leaving an old home and going to a strange one, but something beyond that; like ceasing to live one's own life, and then beginning it over again in the life of another: it seems such a voyage of discovery! But I beg all your pardons,' Alice added: 'Mr. Delacombe, go on with your review, please, and I will not offend again. Talking of emigrants, Hatty, did you read about that Queensland ship which went ashore on the Dorsetshire coast the other day? The poor people were all saved,

but they lost their furniture and clothes and everything.'

'Yes; was it not piteous,' said Hatty.

'And did you see how the accident happened?' asked Percy, who was quite at his ease on this topic; as Alice doubtless intended he should be when she introduced it. 'It was the most singular thing; a barque had gone ashore at the same spot soon after nightfall, and this poor ship mistook her lights for those of the semaphore, and ran straight upon the rocks a little way off. Only one thing more singular about the matter, and that was the cargo they had put on board her; just as well for the emigrants, I should think, that they didn't get away to sea.'

'What was the cargo?' asked Hatty.

'Lucifer matches and gunpowder,' said Percy; 'after the wreck, I saw that for days the people were picking up great bales of vestas and other combustibles; the powder they couldn't get at. A nice sort of stowage that to have on board with you: I wish they could have put some of the Admiralty people there.'

'Percy, Percy, my dear boy,' said his father,

looking up; 'pray be careful. You might lose your ship by a foolish speech of that kind.'

'Better that perhaps, papa, than losing her by being ordered to sea with holes in the copper sheathing that you might dive through; and then, after you'd been sat upon for a fortnight, and witnesses telling all kinds of lies about you, to have your sword returned by a party in a cocked-hat with the announcement that you stood exonerated from blame. Blame! when they'd been doing their best to drown you, and would too if it hadn't been for you and the other fellows having some pluck. More than they'd have had themselves, I expect. It isn't the heads of the department I mean; they work hard enough in all conscience, and order right enough; as to the present top-sawyer, he's worth all that ever came before him. But he can't be everywhere; and those rascally subs don't care whether a ship sinks or swims.'

'Well, but, Percy, you needn't get so excited over it,' said his sister.

'Oh! I'm not excited,' said Percy: 'no reason why I should be. I only wish, though, that you'd heard them go on in the House the other night

when this question turned up ; I wouldn't have missed it for anything. A young fellow called Mansel got me in.'

'Mansel,' asked Mr. Delacombe, looking up again from his review ; 'is he from these parts ; a Glamorganshire family ?'

'Not that I am aware of,' said Percy ; 'I think he is a Londoner born, but I am not sure ; we never referred to Wales in any way. In fact, I only know him slightly, meeting at the same dining-rooms two or three times, and getting into talk together ; then one day we were speaking of the House of Commons, and he offered to get me in. He has an uncle who has some appointment there.'

'How I should enjoy going to the House,' said Alice.

'It's entertaining enough," said Percy, whose indignation had calmed down by this time ; 'but you would be banished to the ladies' gallery.'

'Is that very bad ?' asked Alice.

'I have never been there myself,' said Percy ; 'your—I mean, Miss Léonie Brereton told me about it ; she had been there a few weeks before. It's like one of Wombwell's places for the wild-beasts,

with a low flat ceiling, and bars in front ; you can only look through with one eye at once. Even where we go, it's very puzzling at first ; all you see is a mass of black hats ; then you get to recognise two or three of the faces, or some one points them out ; Disraeli always has his hat over his eyes, and Sir James Pakington is tearing up papers all the time.'

'I don't see why they should cage up the ladies out of sight,' said Hatty : 'it seems a great shame.'

'Oh ! Hatty,' said Alice Brereton, 'It would never do for them to be seen : fancy if Mr. Delacombe were in the House and had an important speech to make, and you were just in front watching him all the time ; what an interruption it would be !'

'Well, but Alice,' said the vicar, 'there is another House in which I am very often, and make, as I flatter myself, a good many important speeches, and have Hatty there all the time within two yards of me ; and yet I do not find any bad results.'

'Oh ! but, Mr. Delacombe,' said Alice, 'that is so different ; people don't get excited there, as they do in Parliament.'

'No, they generally go to sleep,' said the vicar.

‘Besides,’ said Alice, ‘in church everybody has come to do the same thing, . . .’

‘More or less,’ interposed the vicar again.

. . . ‘whereas in the House of Commons they are all on different sides, and so would the visitors in the ladies’ gallery be, and nothing would prevent their joining in. Think of the havoc we should occasion in public business.’

‘But they are present all the same,’ Hatty still urged, ‘although out of sight.’

‘The very thing, my dear,’ said her brother. ‘Fancy a young fellow getting up to speak, with a very pretty girl—say Miss Léonie—sitting just opposite to him; especially if he cared for her at all. He would forget half he meant to say, to begin with, and leave the rest unsaid, for fear she shouldn’t like it.’

‘Well, I suppose both of you are right,’ said Hatty. ‘Papa, talking of Wombwell, what do you think Mr. Morgan at Swansea told me the other day.?’

‘I have no idea,’ said the Vicar.

‘Why, we were talking about his parish and the services, and I asked him if the people came regu-

larly. "Pretty well, Miss Delacombe," he said; "once a year the church is quite full at any rate; galleries, side aisles, and everywhere; no standing room even." Then he asked me to guess when this was.'

'When the Bishop preaches?' asked Mr. Delacombe.

'No; you would never find out. It is when the menagerie comes there.'

'But the menagerie don't go to church.'

'No, but the band does,' said Hatty; 'they come and play there, and the whole of Swansea comes too to hear them.'

'It shows what we might do if we had more lively music on those occasions, I suppose,' said Mr. Delacombe. 'Hatty, you must take our choir in hand; perhaps after all, I was precipitate in abolishing old Harland's double-bass and the two fiddlers. However, I am open to conviction.'

Starting from this point, the desultory breakfast-talk which we have been sketching concentrated itself upon Trecoed church-music; accompanying this with some marginal references to Trecoed parish matters in general, which, although tending to more

practical results than what had preceded them, are hardly of a nature to which we should be justified in inviting the reader's attention.

What is more material, is the impression left by their recent conversation upon the minds of two of those who had been parties to it. When Trecoed, ecclesiastical and social, had been competently discussed, the two gentlemen went their way—we are not concerned with them, at present—and the two ladies went theirs: each in a different direction, and each of the two with a strangely divergent train of thought.

Hatty's avocations ranged within the nearer orbit of domestic duty at the Vicarage, so we shall deal with her first.

'If I could only know,' said Hatty to herself as she passed and repassed between her various spheres of occupation; 'if I could only know! Percy cares for her, that I am quite sure of; I don't suppose he is deeply touched yet, he has been so much away, and they were both so young formerly; but still he has not at all forgotten her: I can see it every time he moves and speaks. But Alice herself, how does she feel? Really, well as I know her, I cannot say.

She perplexes me ; if it was anybody else, I should say she was playing the coquette. That can't be, I know ; but then, there is just the puzzle. I should not have minded her seeming to shrink from him, that would be natural enough ; what is inconsistent, if she really does care for him, is this sort of off-hand manner when they meet. I cannot at all understand it !

‘No,’ resumed Hatty, taking up her reflections from the point at which they had been interrupted by the arrival of a brace of birds with Mr. Jarratt’s compliments, ‘that must be it ; she cannot care for him really ; she *cannot*. I wonder why it is ? Perhaps now they are grown up she feels the intellectual difference between them more. I wonder at it, too ; of course she would never care for a man who had no character at all, or who couldn’t open his mouth without being laughed at ; a little idiot like that Burrows for instance ; but then Percy is not that. If this is the reason, it must be from her conscientiousness ; she may be afraid of there being some untrodden ground between them, something which would lead to unhappiness, and which she ought to avoid for his sake ; that would be just like Alice.

But then how am I to meet this on Percy's behalf ; how am I to approach the subject at all with her, or him either ? I should only do mischief, as he says. It must take its own course.'

So ruminated Hatty ; not altogether without a perception of the truth as regarded the ultimate grounds of the barrier which seemed to have interposed itself between the two persons whom she loved best, although with a total misconception of its more immediate cause.

Alice herself, meanwhile, was pursuing the errand on which she had started when Hatty had summoned her indoors ; a visit to the Mrs. Meadows spoken of in a former chapter, an old lady of independent income, but so lonely and helpless that a few hours spent with her were an act of charity as well bestowed, and possibly more costly in itself, than a money alms in some poorer quarter. Mrs. Meadows lived at some little distance from the Vicarage ; and Alice, as she walked on, busied herself in thought upon the conversation which we have recently detailed, or rather upon some portions of it.

Many a true word is spoken in jest, says the

proverb. Yes. And many a legacy of after reflection is left by the half-hour's pleasant talk which seemed to ripple on so lightly and aimlessly at the time, but underneath which were throbbing unperceived the passion-currents of human hearts!

‘What a hypocrite I am,’ was the reflection which suggested itself to Alice’s mind most prominently as she walked along: ‘a hypocrite to self; passing off, or trying to pass off, these juggler tricks upon my own heart! If I were to accept them, I should give myself credit for having achieved my task so well; shown in voice and manner what I am resolved I will show, and will feel too, the happiness of knowing that they will be happy together; for although Léonie has not written to me yet, I know that she will return his liking; how can she help doing so? This is the task before me; and if I were to let the imposture pass, I should applaud myself for having got on so well with it. Just as if I did not know better! As if our talk together just now cost me a moment’s effort; as if when I laughed with them I was putting any force upon myself; was not indulging myself, my own weakness;—well, yes, my love;

I may as well call it so. As if I could hear his voice, or be in the same room, or under the same roof with him without feeling happy ;—for the time being ; reaction enough afterwards ! Then that pang, that terrible feeling again, when he spoke of —of her ; when he praised her so ; the hope too which I know I felt, which I never shall shake off, that perhaps she may not come to care for him ; that perhaps he may be disappointed ; that way, or some other way ! How I hate myself for it all ! Why cannot I be what I do try to be ?’

So Alice’s thoughts ran on ; probing, analysing, self-accusing. Perhaps Mr. Langridge was right ; even conscientiousness has its limits ; its undue development may be baneful to ourselves, may entail suffering to others ; duty and even heart-loyalty may err in act if not in intention !

Or perhaps, more truly, all such things are but links in the great chain of consequences ; woven into it by the Intelligence which, while it leaves man’s will unfettered, overrules its good and evil alike to a foreseen end. If the purest aims fail, as they so often do, in their results ; if suffering is so often vicarious, the best and truest hearts so often

left to pay the penalty for the misdeeds of others, or even undergoing it of their own choice, it may be but part of some deep-seated law of EXPIATION ;—guilt atoned for by innocence ; the holocaust of self-sacrifice reversing the doom of antecedent crime !

CHAPTER VIII.

Two persons necessary to the due development of this story still remain to be introduced to the reader. One of these has been incidentally mentioned in an earlier chapter; the Mrs. Ponsonby, Sir Edgar Brereton's widowed sister-in-law, who had come to reside with him at Ceniarth soon after his wife's elopement and consequent exclusion from his house. The other, who has not yet been named, is her son, Stephen Ponsonby; the only child of the deceased younger brother of Sir Edgar already also referred to, and as such, the baronet's next male heir in his estates.

Next heir, that is, assuming that Ceniarth had been entailed in the male line; or that, notwithstanding the absence of any such entail, Sir Edgar had seen fit to regulate the succession of the estates, which in this event would be, as they in fact were, at his own absolute disposal, in analogy to it.

Such a settlement of the property, however, was as far as possible from entering into Sir Edgar's contemplation. As Hatty told Mr. Langridge, he had at one time thought of carrying his adoption of Léonie so far as to substitute her, with the exception of a moderate life income to Alice, in the place of the latter. The idea, however, if ever seriously entertained, had been quickly abandoned; Sir Edgar's sense of right at once revolted against it. As he had thought and spoken of the mother, so, when this matter of the succession came before him for actual decision he at once pronounced on behalf of the daughter; 'Let her have what the law gives her,' he said to himself. How much of priceless worth that is within a father's bestowal was excluded by this formula, was another question; for the present purpose it was sufficient, and, as between Léonie and Alice, the latter was secured in her rights accordingly. Sir Edgar would not make his will indeed; something in him rebelled against a disposition of what he had to give, in express terms, to the child of the offender. But he did what came to the same thing; secured to Léonie the small competence of which Hatty had spoken, and allowed his

other possessions, real and personal, to devolve in their presumable legal succession to Alice.

This being so, however, and as Sir Edgar had refused to adopt any irregular course in contravention of Alice's claims, even at the suggestion of his own preference for Léonie, it was in the nature of things that he should be still less disposed to do so for the benefit of his nephew, Stephen Ponsonby, of whom he knew but little, and disliked all that he did know. So that although, as we have said, Stephen was Sir Edgar's next male heir, assuming that there was any inheritance which, either by right or in derogation of it, might descend to him, yet, as there was none such, the result was that he was simply the baronet's next male kinsman. At Ceniarth he was a most rare visitor, and then only by special invitation ; for some years past he had not been there at all.

Now, this was a position with which Stephen's mother, Mrs. Ponsonby, was entirely dissatisfied. Stephen himself was dissatisfied too ; that is to say, he would greatly have preferred that things should be the other way, and if any safe and promising opportunity had offered of reversing them, would

have worked it out to its results with the resources of a wholly unscrupulous nature. But it was patent to Stephen's mind that no such chance ever could present itself. He was a solicitor by profession, and a man of cool judgment in all matters ; and if the chimera of modifying in any way Sir Edgar's disposition of his property had ever crossed his brain, it was only to be discarded as unworthy a moment's thought.

With the mother, on the other hand, things were widely different. Her discontent was of the most active character : if hope were excluded it was in no degree her own fault ; she had expended time and toil enough in endeavouring to bring about a different result ! Often and often under the various approaches of sympathy and friendly suggestion on the one side, and prejudice, inuendo and misrepresentation on the other, she had endeavoured to influence Sir Edgar as to the destination of his property. But he was unassailable ; she was peremptorily refused even a hearing ; at all events as soon as her purpose was divined.

The result of these discomfitures, however, was the reverse of what it would have been with many women.

Mrs. Ponsonby's was a persistent nature ; and Mrs. Ponsonby had an extremely narrow income : but for the shelter of the Ceniarth roof, and the unstinting liberality of its present occupant, her position would be simple penury. And this result might happen any day : Sir Edgar's life was by no means a good one. Any day he might succumb to some unforeseen attack, leaving Mrs. Ponsonby her £50 a year, and Alice in full possession !

Yes, and there was the special, and, for our purpose, the final sting ; for we must not spend time on this preliminary matter. Sir Edgar did not love his daughter. But with Mrs. Ponsonby there was no need to soften matters : she hated Alice with all the bad heart of a bad woman. Whether cause or effect this, it is useless to enquire. Probably it was compounded of both. Alice stood in Mrs. Ponsonby's way, and every faculty she possessed was directed towards removing the obstacle, if possible : cause enough this for aversion to the innocent object of her schemes ; while, the more aversion she felt, the greater impulse her scheming received in consequence.

But enough of this.

What is material is that Mrs. Ponsonby by no means despaired of eventual success, and was still steadily on the watch for any means of securing it. Fruitlessly enough, up to the time of which we write. But at this time, some feasibility of the kind, distant and shadowy, but still not wholly beyond the range of calculation, did seem to present itself. As shall be now related.

The relative with whom Léonie was staying in town was a Miss Lester; a sister of her mother's, and, as Alice Brereton had told Percy, an invalid: habitually so for some years, and recently with an access of ailment which had obtained Sir Edgar's consent to her request for a prolongation of Léonie's visit. As to Léonie, she was happy anywhere; by no means the model young lady, at any rate at present, but useful, energetic, and good-tempered. So Miss Lester was fortunate in securing her; while Léonie's nature was unselfish enough, apart from such improvements as it had probably derived from Alice, to acquiesce without repining at the substitution of the Bayswater *ménage* and the confinement of a sick room for the indulgencies and freedom of Ceniarth.

The house at which Léonie had met Percy Delacombe was that of a friend of Miss Lester who resided at a few streets' distance from the latter, Léonie having gone there at the urgent request of her aunt, who feared her suffering by the monotony of her present occupation.

The evening had been employed by Miss Lester herself in drawing up instructions for a will which she was anxious to make. Next day, these were duly communicated to a solicitor in the neighbourhood; and, two days later, when Léonie returned from the daily walk in Kensington Gardens also imposed upon her by Miss Lester's watchfulness, she found on entering the drawing-room, into which her aunt's chair was wheeled every afternoon, that the solicitor was there in conference; the will had been duly prepared and fair-copied, and was now ready for execution. At the same time, Léonie, with considerable surprise, became aware of another fact;—that she was already acquainted with the visitor. She recognised him at once, and evidently with pleasure. 'Mr. Ponsonby!' she exclaimed.

'I am flattered by being remembered,' said

Stephen, who, we may mention here, was a gentleman in speech and address; capable, when he chose, of making himself agreeable enough. He did not recollect Léonie, however, and was compelled to own as much. When she had revived his memory by a reference to Ceniarth, Stephen, being ready of speech and Léonie's senior by more than fifteen years, had no difficulty in excusing himself. 'He now perfectly recollected the very young lady whom he had sometimes played with on his last visit there,' he said; 'but beautiful as Miss Léonie Brereton then promised to be, he was not prepared for finding the promise so surpassed.' Then Stephen enquired with much interest for Sir Edgar; and finding that when Léonie last heard from home the baronet was sound in mind and body, returned to his client's will.

'My niece has just come back in time,' said Miss Lester, who was wholly unprepared for the recognition which had taken place; 'I suppose she can be one of the witnesses?'

'Well, no,' said Stephen, smiling; 'I have my fair cousin's interests—you know we are connected,

Miss Brereton—so much at heart, that I must veto that. We must have two strangers, if you please, Miss Lester.’

So the testatrix’s two servants appeared from downstairs, and her signature was duly affixed to the will. Stephen Ponsonby seemed in no hurry to leave, notwithstanding the press of business in the office on which he had founded his apologies to his client for being, as he was, a day late with his engrossment. He explained to each witness in turn the meaning of the attestation clause, as he was pleased to term it; pointed with his finger to the exact spot where she was to sign; had her Christian name and surname spelt and re-spelt before he trusted the pen in her hand; carefully applied the blotting-paper after each such signature; folded the will and endorsed it with professional neatness; and, intermediately with each and all of these processes, directed such furtive glances towards Léonie, who was still in the room, as could be indulged in without violation of good breeding.

For once in his life, Stephen Ponsonby experienced an emotion which was not only genuine in itself, but also lay outside the region of cupidity and

self-interest which formed his habitual character. He unaffectedly admired Léonie Brereton, and was rapidly undergoing the process of finding the admiration converted into a warmer feeling. Perhaps such feeling only as even base natures, continuing in their baseness, are capable of. Perhaps one which, had propitious circumstances been allotted to it, might have purified the nature from its sordid qualities. Who can say?

Strange, that the one thing which bad men do right, or which might result in their right action, the one true and holy feeling which forms an oasis in the surrounding desert, should so often be attended with graver disasters, even at times with heavier guilt to the person in whom it exists, than his previous misdeeds! The waters launched from the mountain-cliff flow irrevocably, but exert no disturbing influence on those which succeed them; the erring purpose, once admitted in act, travels to its own goal and involves the future as it does so!

Stephen Ponsonby's devices for protracting his stay were exhausted at last, and he took his leave accordingly.

‘I had no idea that you knew that man,’ said Miss Lester to her niece as soon as the subject of her remarks was out of hearing.

‘Only as a small child at Ceniarth, aunt,’ said Léonie; ‘how have you made his acquaintance yourself?’

‘He has been here occasionally about the house,’ said Miss Lester; ‘he is the landlord’s man of business, I believe; at any rate, I am always referred to him when there are repairs to be done. I do not like him at all.’

‘Why did you have him to make your will then?’ asked Léonie.

‘I thought he would do well enough for that,’ said her aunt, ‘and he lives near here; in fact, I do not know any other solicitor. He seems clever and attentive, but I dislike him personally.’

‘I am sorry for that,’ said Léonie, ‘for I have very grateful feelings towards him.’

‘Grateful, my dear? how so?’ asked Miss Lester.

‘Why,’ said Léonie, ‘he used to take my part in those days against Widow Ponsonby, as Hatty always calls her; the double-faced, back-biting viper

that she is.' Wherein if Miss Léonie Brereton was betrayed into some confusion of metaphor, it must be put down amongst the other bad results of Mrs. Ponsonby.

'Léonie, dearest, remember you are eighteen now,' said Miss Lester in a tone of mild remonstrance. 'Do you mean his mother?' she added.

'Yes, aunt,' said Léonie, somewhat abashed for the moment, but starting anew on the current of her recollections immediately afterwards: 'Papa's sister-in-law, you know, who lives with him at Ceniarth. She really is a viper though, Aunt, only it's such a bad compliment to that reptile; malicious to her fingers' ends; a regular Potiphar's wife sort of woman.'

'Dearest Léonie!' interceded Miss Lester once more.

'Yes, Aunt, I know I ought not to have said that, but I couldn't help it. Don't you understand,' continued Léonie, who, as we have said, was by no means a perfect character, and one of whose imperfections consisted in a total inability to stop herself, or make it feasible for any one else to stop her, when carried away by an exciting topic, 'Don't you

understand what I mean ; a sort of woman who hasn't the ghost of a conscience, and will say and do the most wicked and untrue things out of mere spite ; and yet be so plausible that everybody believes her as if she was a saint ! I'll tell you who she is just like ;—no, of course, you don't know her, though ;—that canting bible-woman whom Mr. Ruby, the copper-boiler maker at Swansea, brought into our parish, the year he came there, to annoy the vicar : there was not a cottage in the place where she did not organize some quarrel or the other, slandering one and maligning the other, and yet all the time purring about with New Testaments like a converted tabby-cat !'

'But how did this gentleman, this Mr. Ponsonby, take your part ?' asked Miss Lester, who knew by experience that the readiest mode of checking Léonie's denunciations was by turning her thoughts into another channel.

'Oh ! two or three times when the widow scolded me, and threatened to tell papa . . .'

'Sir Edgar, do you mean ?' asked Miss Lester.

'Yes, Aunt, I beg your pardon ; it is stupid of me to call him papa excepting at home, but you

see I have done so all my life, and he still wishes me to do it.'

'Surely, yes, of course,' said Miss Lester; 'it is quite natural: I only asked because my old woman's brain got puzzled for a minute; you cannot possibly do wrong in speaking of your benefactor as you are accustomed to do, whether at Ceniarth or anywhere else. Go on, my dear.'

'Well,' said Léonie, 'then Mr. Ponsonby interfered, and begged me off, or rescued me from the widow's fangs some way; once, I remember, he spoke quite sharply to her, and said it was a shame, and so it was, for it was all about nothing at all; only for being too impetuous, as she called it.'

'But you know, Léonie dear, you are impetuous,' said Miss Lester.

'No, Aunt, I am not,' replied Léonie, with some indignation; 'you wouldn't like one not to feel things, and when one does feel, one must speak and act directly straight out at once; but I am sure you can't call that impetuosity. Aunt?' continued the speaker, bringing her reflections to a sudden stand-still, and looking up in Miss Lester's face with an enquiring expression.

‘Yes, my dear,’ said that lady.

‘I want to ask something, please. What was that about your will ; why did that man, as you think fit to call poor Mr. Ponsonby, say that I must not be a witness?’

‘Well, my dear,’ said Miss Lester, ‘there is no reason why you should not know ; in fact, I should have made a point of telling you before long, in any case. The reason is, as Mr. Ponsonby explained to me while the servants were coming up, that no one can witness a will who takes any interest under it ; that is to say, if they do witness it, they lose their interest.’

‘And do you mean, Aunt,’ asked Léonie, ‘that you have been giving me any of your money by that thing?’

‘There is little enough to give,’ said Miss Lester ; ‘but what there is, with the exception of two or three trifling legacies, I have certainly disposed of in your favour.’

‘Then I certainly shan’t take it, Aunt,’ said Léonie ; ‘I hope it will be a great many years before any one does, but I certainly will not. I saw where you put the paper, and I shall burn it on the

first opportunity. So you and Mr. Ponsonby had better set to work again as soon as possible.'

'But, my dear child,' said Miss Lester, 'who should I leave my little property to if not to yourself? You will be very glad of it, even with the settlement Sir Edgar has kindly made upon you; and it is your due, if only for coming here to nurse an old . . .'

'An old obstinate aunt,' said Léonie, stopping Miss Lester's mouth with her hand; 'fortunately, Providence has blessed her with a niece who is quite as obstinate. If you must make these arrangements so long beforehand I can find a legatee for you at once; poor Lucy Sims, who is slaving her soul out as a governess, and with those carrotty-headed children too.'

'But she is only a sort of second or third cousin of ours,' said Miss Lester.

'Never mind that, Aunt; she wants it, and I do not, and I don't intend to have it: I should think not, mixing up ideas about executors and coupons and those sort of things with your dear old inconsiderate self. So I shall just sit down and write to Lucy what you intend doing for her.'

‘Léonie, my dear child!’ pleaded the aunt.

But Léonie had seated herself at the writing-table while her own speech was in progress; and had advanced as far as ‘Dearest Lu’ before Miss Lester had completed hers.

‘I shan’t tell her particulars,’ said Léonie, still writing, and with occasional pauses between the words as she indited some fresh sentence; ‘and I know well enough she would not care to know them, and would never think about them if she did; of course Lucy has not the same attachment to you that I have, but she is not a leech or a vampire, all the same. All she will feel will be that there is just this little something for her in the future: if she ever survives those children, that is; I shouldn’t myself. I wonder why people have red hair; I suppose it is an inscrutable dispensation, like black-beetles.’

‘But, Léonie,’ again interposed her aunt, although not in the most confident tones, ‘I really cannot allow this: I cannot indeed.’

‘But you must, Aunt, please,’ said Léonie, who was nearly at the fourth page of her note. ‘There, I have made a smudge; that is because you interrupted me.’

‘But . . . but, my dear,’ persisted Miss Lester, with the sort of spasmodic effort which indicates that the garrison are on the verge of capitulating, ‘it is quite impossible; the will would have to be altered, or made over again, I daresay.’

‘Then have it made over again,’ said Léonie; ‘I will write to Mr. Ponsonby to come up this evening about it. If you let me do that, I will promise not to send off Lucy’s note till it is all finished.’

‘It must be to-morrow morning then, my dear,’ said Miss Lester, submitting to her fate. ‘I am really not equal to it to-day: besides, there will be so much to consider.’

‘Nothing at all, Aunt; merely altering the name all through, Lucy Sims instead of Léonie Brereton; mine is the prettiest, although I am very fond of “Lucy” too. What time shall I say to-morrow?’ continued Léonie, who had already made some progress with note No. 2; and who, it may be observed by the way, whatever critics might pronounce as to her Christian name, was looking unspeakably pretty herself as she wrote, flushed with the excitement of the recent conversation.

‘Well, if it must be so, you had better say twelve,’

said Miss Lester with a resigned sigh. 'You must write in my name you know, my dear.'

'Certainly, Aunt; I am not addicted to correspondence with young gentlemen, or middle-aged ones either, which is Mr. Ponsonby's happy lot. What's his address, Aunt?'

So the note was despatched; and Stephen Ponsonby, who presented himself at the time named, received his instructions for the alteration in the will; not without some wonderment, as the deposed legatee was seated in the room the whole time, evidently a pleased and interested spectator of what went on. Léonie, in fact, although she did not assume to take any part in the proceedings, had stationed herself there, like Spenser's porter within the barbican, for due 'watch and ward,' feeling that her aunt was probably not to be trusted out of her own sight.


And when, two days later, Stephen brought back the new will, which he had advised in lieu of an alteration by codicil, Léonie was there again; partly to insure the document not being tampered with at the last moment, and partly to have the pleasure of affixing her own name to it as one of the witnesses;

—unobjectionably enough now, under the altered conditions of Miss Lester's disposing mind.

The general conversation which passed on these two later visits of Mr. Ponsonby's, does not call for mention here: as before, it was protracted by his admiration for Léonie almost to the verge of professional good-breeding; but this did not represent a period of many minutes, and when they were expired, Mr. Ponsonby had to efface himself from the scene also. But, brief as they were, they interpolated his office hours, as well on the two days in question, as on many successive ones, with topics so foreign to building leases, bills of costs, and the other routine of a solicitor's work, that the grim premises in which it was carried on, if they could have reflected their occupant's present aspect of thought, would have found themselves entirely transformed. As they existed in fact, they presented a couple of dingy rooms, lined in their upper section with deed-boxes, and refreshing the eye below with the deal stool and writing-desk of the clerk's room, and the well-worn mahogany table, dusty books, and red-taped papers of his principal's. As the latter now saw them, they were a garden of beatitudes, bright with flowers,

odororous with scented groves, harmonious with the song of birds and music of falling streams ! Stephen was, beyond all controversy, in love.

So much in love, that he was unable wholly to exclude his emotions from a business letter which he had occasion to despatch, soon after the matters just narrated, to his mother, Mrs. Ponsonby. Stephen had no intention of exhibiting his frailty in this quarter, far from it. Nobody knew better than himself how little his parent's nature was, or ever could be, in harmony with such a subject : to detail to her the hopes, doubts, anxieties, and other phenomena of the tender passion, even in a swain of less mature years than himself, would be like asking the sympathy of a turnip. In fact, Stephen had by no means realised as a definite fact, even in his own mind, that he was in love with Miss Léonie Brereton. He entertained a consciousness, half pleasing and half painful, that some change had taken place in him ; and that this change had reference to the undoubted charms of that young lady, and represented in him, in connection with the impressions resulting from them, a necessity of reproducing the latter as often as possible, and a certain subjugation and loss




of personal freedom in consequence. But he had never distinctly accepted these new conditions of existence as objective facts ; still less, mapped out any course of procedure with regard to them, or dreamt of soliciting counsel and confidence under the circumstances.

But for all this, Stephen could not keep Miss Léonie Brereton out of his letter. Indite what he would, these luckless reminiscences would still recur ; where she had been seated, how she had looked, what sort of greeting she had given him : how bright had been her smiles, how rapturous the sensation when her hand had been extended to meet his own on taking leave ! He did not indeed transfer these glowing images to the office letter-paper. But he did what came to the same thing ; he mentioned Miss Léonie Brereton's name two or three times in the course of his epistle, and each time, under circumstances when the necessities of the Indian Gondola Company Six per cent. Preference Shares, in reference to which he was writing, by no means required its introduction.

Mrs. Ponsonby had lived far too many years in the world not to know what this meant ; and it set

her pondering very deeply. Suggested, in fact, a wholly new idea. The letter reached her at Ceniarth, to which she had recently returned from a visit to some Cheltenham friends; so the idea admitted of being worked out, in theory—no prospect of anything further at present—on the scene of intended action, and at entire leisure. And Mrs. Ponsonby set herself to work accordingly.

Stephen in love, taken abstractedly, was a simply ridiculous notion, no doubt. Nor, if it should turn out, as it promised to do, that the person who had roused the latent flame in his breast was Léonie Brereton, was this, as an abstract proposition, of much importance; if he chose to make a fool of himself, he might do so with her or anyone else so far as his affectionate mother was concerned. But then, there was one possible point of view from which, if things could be so contrived, her son's union with Léonie might not be so unimportant. Viewed merely as one young lady out of a large number similarly situated, possessing good looks but very little besides, Léonie presented a very uninteresting subject for speculation. But view her as a possible successor to the Ceniarth estates, and the



question assumed the most practical bearings. And might not this be so?

Mrs. Ponsonby brought all the faculties with which nature had endowed her to bear upon this consideration. She was well aware that Sir Edgar had at one time thought of substituting Léonie for Alice as his successor. He had abandoned the idea; true; but, might he not be led to resume it?

Not as things were, doubtless; that was palpable, without any prolonged scrutiny of the position. Sir Edgar was, as he had been throughout, calmly although severely just. Alice was, as she had been from her childhood upward, downcast for the want of the love she had ever craved, but without suspicion of offence. No materials in this to work upon;—as things were. But things might change.

The natures were not likely to do so, unquestionably. But their relative position might; *their belief in each other might*.

Alice's belief in her father?—of small moment that.

But his in her; in her innocence, her unselfishness, her strength of purpose; her qualities of heart and mind, so like his own, and which, if


he could only have won back for them the love he yearned to give, the instinct common to the least refined natures, to the brutes themselves, but denied to him, would have drawn him to her so closely ; his belief in all these ?

Suppose, as an hypothesis, that Sir Edgar's present trust in these could be disturbed, leaving nothing between him and Alice but the old shrinking repugnance, itself become an instinct now :—might not Mrs. Ponsonby hope then ?

Surely, yes. She was no profound student of character, but she knew enough of men and women to be satisfied that she might do that.

True, the hypothesis seemed an unlikely one at present. But what of that ? There was the future. Delusions happen to the wisest and best of mankind : much more to one like Sir Edgar, whose very strength of mind was weakness, whose mental force, unimpaired in its own constitution, was liable to become morbid in the proportion in which it ran counter to other natural forces !

Besides, the range of possibilities did not lie wholly in the future : something might be done even now.



Something by Stephen, for instance: let him advance his suit, if he could, and as and when he could. Not in any open way; Mrs. Ponsonby wrote to him very expressly on that score; better, perhaps, during Léonie's stay in town that he should not attempt to see her again; Sir Edgar disliked him, and, should he hear of any further visits, might forbid them or recall Léonie; better run no risk of that kind. Still, anything he could do compatibly with these precautions, he might do.

Then, as to Mrs. Ponsonby herself, it occurred to her, that besides generally keeping her eyes open, she might also do something in the way of suggestion, even at present; something, at any rate, towards ascertaining the state of Sir Edgar's feelings in regard to Alice and matters in general. It required wary handling, but Mrs. Ponsonby felt herself equal to this, and did not over-estimate her powers in so feeling; she was capable of rising to the emergency.

No use in delaying, either: let her begin at once.

CHAPTER IX.


Two companion sketches : contrasting, as pictures which are arranged as pendants to each other often do ; massiveness with grace ; repose with animation ; the dark forest-glade or sombre interior with the sunniness of meadow and sea-shore.

In the present case, the arrangement is not of our own choice. The details of each picture, although not productive of immediate results, have an important bearing on the final issue of the narrative, and belong, in order of time, to the portion of it with which we are now occupied ; a certain Wednesday in August, the day following that on which the conversation at the Vicarage related two chapters back had taken place. It may be added that, in this instance, the elements of contrast are in the main superficial. External, at any rate : affluence and its appliances on the one side ; on the other, the cheerless monotonies of indigence and toil.

Let us look at the more pleasing picture first ; or that which should be so.

Sir Edgar Brereton is alone in his library. A striking and still handsome-looking man, but with something in his face which would hardly dispose you to cultivate much intimacy with him ; probably, would indicate that it might be difficult to do so. The explanation of both convictions, it may be, is a third which is wholly beyond dispute, that he is a person with whom any freedom would be impossible.


Excepting in these points, there is little to distinguish Sir Edgar from any other gentleman of his social position and age, the latter now somewhat past the prime of life. The eye, however, is noticeable ; under the sternness which is its ordinary expression, there is a capacity for quick, warm feeling, at times almost a tenderness, which is not the less remarkable for its being habitually kept in close subjection. No one could look at the present occupant of the library without feeling that he must at some time or other have loved, and that his love must have been deep and earnest ; although capable of being sacrificed without scruple to those more



imperious necessities of the character which had set such impress in the features.

Sir Edgar is engaged in writing, but the pen has lain idle on the inkstand for half an hour past or more. He has been interrupted by the music of a German brass band outside; the performers had gained admission to the grounds, and, seeing a figure in one of the rooms busily occupied, had selected the moment as specially fitting for their intervention. The men played creditably, however, and with the exquisite time of which even the worst of German bands cannot divest themselves. Sir Edgar listened to the airs; sent out a *quid pro quo* for them; and then, when he was again left alone, instead of resuming his occupation, abandoned himself to the train of thought which they had suggested.


‘Lake Zug!’ he mused; ‘what can have brought that to my recollection? One of the tunes they were playing, I suppose; I may have heard it that day. Hardly likely, either, that I should remember it at this interval of time; no use trying to account for it; impossible to tell how it is things do come back to one.



‘So fresh as it all is too,’ continued the baronet, still occupied with the images which had thus suggested themselves to his mind; ‘I hardly suppose I have thought of that afternoon since, and yet it seems as if it was yesterday; the little mountain town; the steamer with its holiday flags flying; the half-dozen Righi passengers on board; the band, which might have been the very men outside the window just now; myself; and,—her! Psha! why do I shrink from pronouncing the word? Not for her sake; that is entirely past and gone. Certainly not for my own: simple enough my part in the matter; there was duty to be done, and I did it, faithfully, manfully. I suppose people gave me hard names enough, perhaps they still do; proud, hard, vindictive, and so on; it skills little; I know better. I know that vindictiveness had nothing to do with it: I could have pitied the poor weak woman when she crouched before me in her self-abasement; I wished her no suffering, no bodily harm. But,—she must cease to exist as far as I am concerned! And she has done so. Neither blame nor merit in the matter; straightforward, peremptory duty on my part, discharged, as I have discharged

such obligations all my life, at whatever personal cost!


‘ Ah! yes, there was cost,’ Sir Edgar still soliloquised, the latent softness of the eye forcing itself into expression for the moment as he did so; ‘ there was cost then and for long afterwards; Heaven knows that. It is no light thing for a man to tear out of his heart such love as mine was; to shut out every memory in the past, every pleading in the present; to do all this unrepentingly, without pause or hesitation. But I succeeded, thank Heaven, hard as it was. Strange, that I should have found so much less difficulty in that other quarter; this girl of hers! There has been nothing to overcome with her; no counter-sentiment to neutralise the repugnance which I entertain for her, and which I conclude she reciprocates! Psha! though, why do I waste time in thinking of it all? More interesting speculations than that for a man who has brains, and cares to exercise them. Here is one, Duty. I used the word just now; thanked Heaven, too, I remember, or some such conventionalism: high time to recast one’s utterances. Perhaps though they are harmless enough; thank Heaven, yes, or thank



Hercules, immaterial which ; the shorter form is the handier at all events, and attracts less notice. As to duty, that is another matter ; you have a substratum of reality there ; every man is a duty to himself, his own deity ; schoolmen and theologians have degraded this moral sense within us, this conscience, instinct, or whatever it should be called, making it subserve their own systems, but there it is, all the same ; inextinguishable in itself, inextinguishable in its results ; the real immortality, of which revelation, as it is called, exhibits the mere sham and counterfeit. I have satisfied that all my life, and shall die content. Pity we can't analyse what death is ; one glimpse would explain everything, but one doesn't get that. Best perhaps to accept it as simple extinction ; there is finality in that ; finality in the abstract, and finality as regards one's own existence, which certainly is not so over-burdened with happiness as to make one desire much prolongation of it.

‘I wonder too why that is,’ continued the baronet, as his thoughts turned into another channel, ‘I wonder why it is that I am not happy ? I have everything to make me so, health, affluence, culti-

vated tastes ; nothing wanting, as far as I can discover ; only, one does not get the results. I was happy enough formerly ; well, yes, at that time ; the man's tune has set me thinking of it, I suppose, but somehow I cannot help recalling that Swiss trip, before——before we met that day. I was on my way home then, I recollect, did the last thing, the Pilatus, that morning ; how I had enjoyed it all ! The Pilatus, by the way ; ah ! I don't know that I did enjoy that : the desolate peak, with its shattered black rock and weird chasms ; it was rather terrifying. Association, I suppose. I was a believer, in those days, in the routine fashion ; went to church, performed other rites and ceremonies ; recited what the prayer-book says about Pontius ; thought it fitting enough, whatever truth there might be in the legend as to that spot being selected, that he should have undergone the horrors of remorse somewhere. I wonder if the legend is true ? Pontius was a fact ; he did, at any rate, perpetrate a cowardly judicial murder, one which would hang like a millstone round a man's neck all his life ; why should he not have taken refuge there ? I believe he did. Tradition says he did,



and that is truer than history, nine times out of ten: it would quite account for the sort of scowl that is about the place, something which I felt at the time, and which followed me all day afterwards, I remember. I wonder if it had anything to do with her; with all the misery I have gone through since? Likely enough. Places are haunted. Not in the vulgar sense, of course; let the spirit part from the body, and, if not resolved into nothingness, which is most probable, it remains helpless and harmless enough; no fear of that ever reappearing. No, but there is another haunting, something which one would as lief not face, the wrong deed and its expiation; they *may* write themselves indelibly enough on these inanimate substances of wood and stone, fasten on the spot an infection like the wall-leprosy of the Jewish lawgiver to those who come after them! Psha! I shall be thinking about that tumble-down affair next; I believe I have been. What have I to do with it? what—— Yes, who is there?’

‘Only me, Edgar,’ said Mrs. Ponsonby, who, having knocked twice unavailingly during her brother-in-law’s soliloquy, now applied the summons a

third time with increased vigour, partially opening the door as she did so.

‘Oh! Bertha,’ said the baronet, effacing from his voice and manner some agitation of which he was conscious in both. ‘Come in; I am glad to see you.’

And Sir Edgar was glad. Any interruption to the gloomy thoughts with which he had recently been occupied would have been acceptable, and Mrs. Ponsonby’s small-talk would help to dissipate them as well as anything else. But independently of this, Mrs. Ponsonby had not resided so long at Ceniarth without some acclimatisation taking place between the baronet and herself. He had got accustomed to her, at any rate, and that means a good deal. Many a man when relieved from a life-long annoyance, has begun to question whether on the whole it was not rather a pleasure!

Besides, Mrs. Ponsonby was not wholly an annoyance. Superficially speaking, and from a merely social point of view, she was rather an advantage. She had travelled; mixed in good circles; had read, and still did read such literature as entailed no effort of thought, while it supplied the materials for



conversation not wholly local or domestic. Taking all things together, Sir Edgar would certainly have preferred to have his sister-in-law in the house to being without her.

Far from clear, in fact, that, as Hatty had suggested, Mrs. Ponsonby had not a good deal of quiet influence over him. The baronet himself was quite clear upon this point; quite satisfied that a person whose schemes and artifices he saw through at a glance could under no possible circumstances affect any act or purpose of his life! But probably the more convinced he was of this, the more likelihood there was of his being wholly mistaken!

We must not however detain Mrs. Ponsonby longer in the library doorway, where she appeared within an hour or two of the decision to 'begin at once' in which her reflections, as stated in the last chapter, had culminated.

'You have come in opportunely,' said the baronet when his visitor was seated; 'my thoughts have been at work with little profit or satisfaction, and I shall be glad to have them diverted. Perhaps you are come here on some business, though?'

‘No,’ said Mrs. Ponsonby; ‘only for half-an-hour’s chat, as it is a wet afternoon.’

‘That is well,’ said Sir Edgar, who spoke in a tone of cheerfulness proportioned to the gloom of his previous reflections: ‘I have hardly seen you since your return. You have been free from your old enemy, I hope, of late?’

‘The cramp, you mean?’ said Mrs. Ponsonby. ‘Thank you, yes, I had only one bad attack while I was away, and that was in my own room, fortunately. I am rather uncomfortable about it, though.’

‘Why so?’

‘Why, from the view which the Cheltenham doctor takes of it: the last was a curious kind of attack, different from any I had had before, and I thought it best to see him. He tells me it is not really cramp at all, but hysteria, followed by something with a hard name: something which is not very painful in itself, but affects the muscles in a strange way, making them quite stiff and rigid.’

‘Tetanus, no doubt,’ said the baronet. ‘I am sorry it has assumed that form, Bertha; you must avoid any undue excitement.’

‘So Dr. Cooper said. There had been a violent thunder-storm that day and I suppose that brought it on ; for a minute or two I was literally fixed to my chair, like a person in the stocks. He told me it might last much longer another time.’

‘I fear it might,’ said Sir Edgar : ‘you must try and prevent any recurrence of it. And how do you find Gower looking ? Rather dull, I suppose, after Cheltenham ?’

‘Cheltenham is well enough as a residence,’ said Mrs. Ponsonby, ‘but one does not get much satisfaction out of it as a mere visitor : it is not like a continental spa, where the gaiety meets you at every turn. I am glad to be back at Ceniarth ; that is to say, if you do not think of turning me out yet.’

‘I have no present intention to that effect, Bertha,’ said Sir Edgar. ‘How is Stephen ?’

This was an unexpected act of graciousness on Sir Edgar’s part ; so unexpected, that for an instant, it flashed across Mrs. Ponsonby’s mind whether a more direct strategy might not be substituted for the oblique attack to which she was now endeavouring to see her way in the future. Like a prudent general, however, she resisted the temptation ; and,

on the contrary, availed herself of the opportunity afforded by the question to disarm the baronet's mind of any apprehensions as to a renewal of her schemes in the past.

‘Quite well, thank you,’ said Mrs. Ponsonby in reply to it; ‘well, and prospering in his profession. It was best for him after all, that you did not comply with the wish which I was foolish enough to urge some years since; he would have been hanging about society, doing nothing and making nothing all this while, and probably for many years to come. As it is, he is now fairly independent; you did the kindest thing by him, rely upon it.’

‘I do not suppose he thinks so,’ said Sir Edgar.

‘Probably not,’ said Mrs. Ponsonby, ‘if he ever thinks about it, which is not often, I expect. He never mentions the subject to me, at any rate.’

‘I spoke out my mind pretty plainly,’ said the baronet.

‘Just so, and so it rests, and there is not much love lost between you two; no malice that I know of, but you each go your own way and see as little of each other as possible, which in the present case means nothing at all. And how is dear Léonie?’

‘Well and happy, when I last heard,’ said the baronet: ‘she has not much time for writing, she tells me. I wish we had her at home again.’

‘I echo the sentiment with all my heart,’ said Mrs. Ponsonby; ‘she is a darling girl. Indeed, I do not know that we have much to complain of as regards either of your daughters, Edgar; at least, I suppose that would be the general verdict.’

A dark shadow passed over Sir Edgar’s face as his sister-in-law spoke. She observed it, without his discovering that she did so, and probed the sore still deeper.

‘I ought not perhaps to have used that phrase,’ she continued; ‘but somehow one comes to look upon dear Léonie as if she were your own child, and she certainly deserves that we should do so. As to Alice, I will not affect to say that I care much for her; it is the difference of our temperaments, I suppose; I do not put much faith in those very pious, good girls, myself. Still, up to the present time she has given you no cause for uneasiness. Do you know, Edgar, if I were you, I think I would try and show her a little more affection, if you will excuse my saying so.’

Again Sir Edgar's brow darkened, but he did not speak. Mrs. Ponsonby continued.

'Of course,' she said, 'I know how difficult this must be for you: you cannot help recalling the past. Then, the likeness is so striking.'

'The likeness!' exclaimed Sir Edgar, half starting from his seat.

'Yes,' said Mrs. Ponsonby; 'surely you must have noticed. I have always done so, although I saw so little of Lady Brere . . .'

'Silence, silence!' Sir Edgar almost shouted; then, with some shame at his emotion, rose and stood by the mantelpiece, with his face resting on one hand.

'I could cut my tongue out,' said Mrs. Ponsonby with an air of well-simulated vexation, 'for being so stupid. I only meant, that, little as I ever saw of—of *her*, the likeness has always seemed to me most remarkable; and I have heard many people say the same: it is something in the general expression of the face, more than in any particular feature. I was exceedingly struck with it on my return home last night; I said to myself, "There is Caroline again!"'

Sir Edgar still kept his face averted, and still without replying. The inquisitor proceeded.

‘I wonder,’ said Mrs. Ponsonby, ‘if Alice has ever been told about all that? I almost fancy she must have been sometimes: there is a sort of moroseness about her, a kind of vindictive look, as if she had something preying upon her mind; and I do not know what else it can be. What do you think, Edgar?’

‘How should I know?’ said the baronet in reply, raising his head for a moment, and then resuming his former position.

‘No, of course you couldn’t know,’ said Mrs. Ponsonby; ‘but you see, if she is living, it is most probable that Alice would have heard about it; the circumstances were sufficiently notorious, unhappily. In fact I should think it probable that there is some communication going on between them; if the woman is still alive, that is to say. You know nothing of that either, I suppose, Edgar?’

‘Why do you torment me like this, Bertha?’ the baronet asked, turning almost fiercely upon the speaker. But he had not the moral courage to free himself from his tormentor, all the same. Many a

man who will face the surgeon's knife without flinching lacks courage to extract the soul-barb which rankles deeper within him at every pulsation.

'You must not give it that name, Edgar,' said Mrs. Ponsonby gently. 'I ought not perhaps to mention the subject to you, but it is one which is often in my thoughts; and to-day our conversation seems to have led to it without my choice. It is very singular,' she added, after some moments' pause, apparently of reflection.

'What is singular?' asked Sir Edgar, moodily.

'Why, that we should never have heard of her since that time: that she should so completely have buried herself out of sight. I know, of course, that you have abstained either from seeking information about her, or receiving any; still, it is curious that you should have heard nothing in all these years. I hardly fancy that she can be dead; had this been the case, you would undoubtedly have known of it; there would have been claims from her family, and things of that kind. Do you not think so?'

Sir Edgar replied by some sound, scarcely articulate, and which might imply either assent or the reverse. Mrs. Ponsonby proceeded.

‘The woman had spirit, as you know,’ she said; ‘it is quite consistent with all I have heard of her that, having once received from you the sentence of banishment, she should be living in voluntary seclusion somewhere, instead of trying to reverse it. This is one of the main things, I think,’ Mrs. Ponsonby continued after a moment’s apparent reflection, ‘in which Alice resembles her; this resolute, self-willed spirit, only in her it is so much stronger. I live in daily expectation that she will make some demand to you.’

‘Demand?’ said the baronet.

‘Yes: come to you with the story of her mother’s wrongs, and insist upon having leave to go and find the woman; to bring her back to Ceniarth.’

‘She would find that rather difficult,’ said Sir Edgar.

‘She would try though,’ Mrs. Ponsonby continued. ‘Of course, I am speaking in ignorance of the facts; she may have heard nothing yet; may not hear anything for some years; by the time she does know all about it, Lady Br . . . I mean, the woman, may have deceased; which I devoutly hope will not be long first, in any case. But, let her be living, and

let Alice discover she is, and we shall see her back at Ceniarth fast enough.'

'Never!' ejaculated the baronet in a tone so deep that it disturbed for a moment even the calm deportment of his visitor.

'Well, no, Edgar, perhaps I was wrong in that,' Mrs. Ponsonby went on when her nerves had regained their composure; 'you are generally pretty firm about a thing when you do make up your mind to it, and I hardly suppose that such an event could happen;—in your lifetime, that is. But afterwards, why then . . . ?'

'Then what?' Sir Edgar again almost shouted.

'Why, then, of course, Alice will be mistress here, and can receive and entertain exactly whomever she thinks proper. But there, Edgar,' continued Mrs. Ponsonby, assuming her most honeyed tones, 'I never meant to vex you, and I hope you will think no more about it: I hardly know how this conversation has arisen. As to that miserable woman, it is at least an even chance that she has quitted this world long since, or, as I said, that she soon will do so; pray think no more about her.'

The only thing I did mean to suggest was about Alice herself.'

'Why do you persist in naming the girl?' said the baronet, scarcely less vehemently than before. 'You must know how things stand between us.'

'Certainly, I do know, Edgar,' said Mrs. Ponsonby, interrupting him; 'I know that you have tried to feel love and attachment for her, and that you cannot; it is exactly my own case. I never have felt quite safe with her, and never shall, with that sort of thing in her constitution. But, there now, I will not say another word. My object in speaking was just to see if I could put things on a better footing as regarded her, but, like most meddlers, I have done more harm than good. Pray don't think of it, Edgar. You have not told me the news yet.'

'News? what news?' replied Sir Edgar, whose agitation had by no means subsided.

'Well, not the parish gossip,' said Mrs. Ponsonby; 'you are not precisely the person I should apply to for intelligence of that kind. But I think you know by this time that gossip is not my vocation. Tell me about your last magistrates' meeting, unless you

consider women generally, and your sister in-law in particular, too silly to understand such matters. The Cefn Bryn inclosure was to come off, you remember ; it was discussed just before I left. What has been done about it ?’

So by degrees, as skilfully as she had led the conversation to the point where it produced the desired impression on the baronet’s mind, Mrs. Ponsonby now guided it in the reverse direction ; gradually leading Sir Edgar to speak on local topics in which he was interested, and so calming down the agitated feelings which he had lately experienced without impairing the permanent effect they were calculated to produce.

But it is time we should quit the Ceniarth library, and exhibit the companion picture of which we spoke at the opening of the present chapter.

It was on the morning of the day on which the conversation just detailed took place, that Reginald Mansel, still an occupant with his mother of the humble lodgings in which we have at first seen them, started up from a sleep which had been too much occupied with the broken images of the preceding day’s work to be refreshing, and, after a hasty toilet,

seated himself at a writing-table which formed part of the furniture of his bedroom.

In the morning, this, and very early in the morning. The month was August, a few weeks after the commencement of our narrative; and although the hands of the alarum clock which had roused him stood at half-past four only, the sun—for at that hour the sun does shine even in London—already streamed in through the curtainless window of his apartment.

In addition to the paper, pens, and ink which stood on the table, there was a brass-bound desk, a present from some school-friend, carefully and jealously locked. Not against possible marauders; even with Reginald's sanguine hopes as to the value of its contents he knew that they were safe from cupidity of all kinds; airy textures, fusible in no receiving-house, convertible for no coin at the most speculative of pawnbrokers. Safe too from the prying gaze of mere curiosity; Mrs. Mansel well knew what was in progress, and was content to wait her son's time for its formal production; and the drudging maid of the house and care-cumbered landlady had both enough of other matters to occupy

them. No, the protection was against Reginald himself. He has a staunch will, as the reader perhaps knows, and he has determined that the desk shall be unlocked for one purpose only, that of adding to its contents; never, until the latter are entirely complete, for the temptation of a perusal.

A vehement temptation this is too; let the literateur who is unconscious of it throw the stone of reprobation at Reginald Mansel for acknowledging its seductions. For the desk contains his first essay in the thankless field of letters; his first work of continuous, sustained production, that is: a poem too, —alas! for the producer;—one into which he has poured the whole wealth of his teeming fancy; canto after canto, abundant in promise as in faults, the rich ore of pathos and imagery gleaming among the crude forms of unpractised authorship. And the author himself knows where the ore lies, well enough. He has not the alchemy, who has? to convert its surroundings into the same precious substance throughout, but he has no difficulty in distinguishing it from them; he knows but too well, knows to a sheet, a line, where the treasures are to be found.

How he longs to feast his eyes upon them; to see

embodied on the paper, a substantive existence already to that extent, the thoughts which leapt into the brain with such vividness; to try and realise how they will look in print!

But he forbears. He knows this will hinder work; will absorb the time which he has wrung so hardly from sleep and exercise, stinting both, that the law of drudgery may not be infringed upon; will cramp the freedom of future production. Let the poem be finished, the manuscript in the printer's hands, and he can dwell upon its contents then at leisure.

And the poem is nearly completed now. So nearly, that, if the muse is propitious, Reginald thinks it possible the concluding lines may be penned by breakfast-time.

He has augured rightly, for this once. Often and often, on former occasions, the hours won for composition at such cost have been all but wasted: the ideas would not flow; if the conception came, the words failed; paltry obstacles, the turn of a phrase, the necessities of rhyme or cadence, have arrested his progress almost hopelessly; a few blurred lines, torn up before recommencing work next day, the only producible results of so much patient

labour ! But, this morning, his pen moves rapidly enough. Sheet after sheet, almost without pause or correction, falls by the side of the writer's chair : by seven o'clock they already form a respectable total.

Another hour : the church-clock from an adjacent steeple strikes eight. Thought still crowding into the brain, shaping itself in verse and stanza almost without the writer's own action in the matter ; the poetic soul asserting its mastery over the mere intellectual forces, compelling them to ply their toil at its bidding ! He should be at the breakfast-table by this time, and a hard enough victory conscience has often won in this matter. But on this occasion, conscientiously or not, he must linger upstairs ; five minutes will complete the task.

Five, ten, fifteen, twenty minutes. Then, just as Mrs. Mansel's voice makes itself audible from the parlour, the inspiration comes. Half-a-dozen vigorous lines, and then the pen is thrown down, the sheets hastily collected, and, with a shout in some language which might be Tahitian, Reginald bounds down three stairs at a time and announces his triumph.

A hurried breakfast : Reginald is too excited to


eat or drink except in snatches. After this, a forenoon stolen, for this once, from the bondage of the conveyancer's chambers; busily occupied in arranging, touching up, re-copying. Then, as it strikes two o'clock, Reginald issues into the street to find—a publisher.

He is half-a-mile from home, manuscript in hand, and traversing the dusty roadway of the suburb at a pace which argues a total unconsciousness of the August sun blazing overhead, before he has even begun to consider who the publisher shall be. Thought has been far too busy upon other matters. Judge him not harshly, kind reader, if through heart and brain are sweeping a tide of boyish fancies, dreams of the success he is to achieve, the interest and curiosity that will be excited by the anonymous author—he has settled that the poem shall appear anonymously; it is the only thing he has settled;—if, as some passage recurs to him from the morning's labour of love, he repeats it half aloud to himself; wonders if the critics will notice the musical chime of this line, the bold imagery or dexterous word-weaving of that; overrules objections, anticipates and removes doubts: pictures, ever and again, some

bright eye kindled into enthusiasm by his verse, or melted to tenderness by its pathos! Judge him not over harshly; or, if so judging, let the penalty he is shortly to pay atone for the offence. Let it be urged, in further mitigation of it, that these musings were interpolated by a wholly unselfish satisfaction. Great was the relief which his mother's circumstances, as well as the relative by whose liberality they had both been so long maintained, would find in the golden harvest which was to ensue;—to Reginald's inexperience the most undoubted result of his publication!

Meanwhile a publisher had to be found. Half an hour of his walk London-wards had now elapsed without Reginald's even turning his thoughts to this vital question; half-an-hour, during which he had exercised no coherent thought at all; living on, if you will, in his fool's paradise, poor boy.

At length, however, the point was forced upon him. His route divided for the City and the West-end, and the choice between the two must be governed by a preliminary one; that of the hands to which his priceless manuscript was to be intrusted.



Of publishers' names he of course knew several, but the difficulty was to select. That he would be welcomed with open arms anywhere, probably even receive a handsome sum down by way of instalment, he had no doubt; but it was matter of consideration with whom he should establish this literary connection!

At length, a well-known name at the West-end suggested itself, and Reginald fixed upon it without further controversy. Pending his decision, he had been standing at the apex of a dingy grass enclosure which marked the divergence of the two highways, exposed to the pleasantries of the watermen on an adjoining cabstand. A parting volley of these sallies now accompanied him, as he started off, at the same rapid pace as before, in the direction of the street where the publisher in question resided.

The person he sought was in town, and, by good fortune, disengaged, and Reginald procured admission; passing, as he did so, by a process the converse of that which instantly suspends one's toothache at the dentist's door, from the transports in which he

had been indulging during his walk to the most abject and entire despair.

A few minutes sufficed to show that this revulsion of feeling was not without sufficient cause.

A brief delay took place, while Reginald, whose heart had well-nigh died out within him, hesitated in what terms to state the object of his visit; his companion meanwhile playing uneasily with his paper-knife, with more than one glance at an ominous pile of letters beside him. At length the manuscript was produced and submitted with trembling hands by Reginald, who sat awaiting the result. It was not long in coming.

‘What . . . what is . . . dear me, this is poetry,’ said the publisher in a tone of perceptible vexation, turning over the sheets rapidly as he spoke.

‘Yes,’ said poor Reginald meekly.

‘But . . . but then,’ said his companion, ‘I do not quite understand; what have you brought this for?’

‘I thought you might be disposed to purchase the work,’ said Reginald, taking heart of grace.

‘Purchase! purchase poetry!’ echoed the publisher, whose mental acumen already began to



exercise itself upon the proportion borne by his unanswered letters to the interval before the five o'clock fast train started; 'dear me! Really I must caution Oliphant,' he added in a half whisper to himself, 'to be more particular whom he admits; dear me!'

Reginald meanwhile had risen, profoundly mortified, and, with some attempt at an apology, prepared to take his departure. His companion however, although a man of quick temper and caustic speech, had a substratum of kindness in his nature. He saw his visitor's disappointment, and well-worn as he was in his craft, could not refrain from sympathising with it.

'I am afraid you are vexed,' he said kindly. 'I hope you have other prospects than authorship; take my word for it, it is a precarious calling; a heart-breaking one, too many have found it. As to poetry, you do not seem to understand; it is wholly exploded!'

'Is it?' said Reginald, wonderingly.

'Wholly,' said the publisher. 'Of course the two or three men who have made their name go on producing, and make money by it; new books are the

fashion, and find purchasers accordingly, so that a thousand or two is no bad investment for them ; not quite so profitable as mantua-making, but still fairly safe. But for any one else to attempt the same thing ; bah !

‘But still,’ urged Reginald, ‘some new poetry must be published sometimes.’

‘A great deal of new poetry is published very often,’ said his companion ; ‘no doubt of that : the point is, what becomes of it. The trunkmaker was the old story, but the trunks now-a-days would not carry off a tithe of the surplus. I suppose there is some limbo for its reception ; blue-books and Chancery pleadings must go somewhere, and I suppose poetry goes there too.’

‘Do you mean that nobody reads it, now-a-days ?’ asked Reginald.

‘Notoriously and unequivocally not,’ said the publisher. ‘Mind, however, do not mistake me ; there are exceptions to the general statement. As I said, there are one or two leading names which do attract readers, simply because they are such ; at least, if there is any other reason I do not know it, unless it be that their poetry is so remarkably like

prose. But, besides this, it is still exceptionally possible for a man to obtain a hearing, even without antecedents of this kind. There are two chances for him. He may write spasmodic poetry, which will neither construe, scan, nor rhyme, with a refrain in every fourth line like a nursery ballad. Or he may produce erotic poems; they are undoubtedly popular. A volume of semi-obscene lyrics, not quite so broad as a French picture, and not quite so profane as Holywell-street, has a very fair circulation; the poetry is not good, and nine-tenths of it are unintelligible; but still it goes down; people pick out the obvious bits. And now, will you excuse me if I say that I am a little pressed for time?’


‘Most willingly,’ said Reginald; ‘pray let me thank you for having bestowed so much of it upon me. You think, then,’ he added, folding up his manuscript, ‘that it is really no use my trying to dispose of this?’

‘I do not like to discourage you,’ said the publisher, with even more kindness than he had before shown, for something in Reginald’s face and manner interested him, ‘still, I fear not. Perhaps you might try my friend and neighbour, round the cor-

ner of the street here ; he has printed some poems himself, and might help you. He will receive you courteously at any rate. Good afternoon.'

The 'friend and neighbour' was also at home, and proved as courteous as he was alleged to be. But he gave Reginald no hope ; the reply was still the same : nothing to be done with poetry ; 'notoriously unsaleable.' If the work were to appear at Reginald's own risk, the publisher would of course be happy to undertake it ; 'although,' he added kindly, with a glance from the lines of toil and anxiety already marked on Reginald's brow to the carefully-brushed and well-worn coat which was just capable of putting in a fortnight's more appearance at chambers, 'it is perhaps almost a mockery to make such a suggestion in your case. Could you not get some pieces into the magazines ? that would make something of a start for you.'

Alas ! Reginald had gone the round of the magazines, months before. Whether the editors really felt the obligation to their correspondent which was expressed in the polite (lithographed or printed) acknowledgment with which his manuscript came back from one serial after another, may be rea-



sonably doubted; at least, if they did, they possessed a sensibility to favours beyond the common lot. Even Reginald would have forgiven this systematic rejection if he could have seen the deluge which swept, thrice in every twenty-four hours, or as much oftener as the postal arrangements of the district permitted, over those devoted heads! Prove your friend how else you will, and he may not be wanting to you; let it devolve upon him to snatch you from fire or water, to bridge the yawning crevasse, or share with you, in an encampment at twelve thousand feet above the sea, the rug under which he has sweltered from the lower valley, and he may show himself a good man and true. But ask him for admission to the magazine of which he possesses the 'open sesame,' and he will renounce you to your face: the test is too crucial!

What chance had poor Reginald then?

Ah! well. He took up his poem from the table once more; thanked his kind-hearted adviser; and then commenced his return homewards.

The day was not more sultry, probably less so, than it had been an hour or two before, but Reginald felt its glare more; the brightness was gone

out of it, and only its burden left ; from an enchanted region, basking in soft light, and fruit-laden as the gardens of Alcinoüs, Reginald passed into an everyday atmosphere ; not improved by the fact that, even in the August afternoon, chimney upon chimney was reeking overhead, and that the respiratory conditions thus produced were shared by him in common with some two or three millions of his species.

As Reginald crossed Westminster Bridge he leant for a moment over the parapet. He had done so in the morning, he recollected, and thought how noble the river was looking ; how bright its surface, dotted with craft of all kinds, chafing with a musical ripple under the arches of the graceful viaduct : the silver Thames of English descriptive poetry ! His impressions were altered now. What he saw beneath him was a sullen and turbid stream, unattractive to more senses than one, and tenanted only by dingy lightermen, and a Putney steamboat laden with passengers from stem to stern ! Reginald turned away with disgust from the altered spectacle ; as he did so, the manuscript on which he had built such fond hopes dropped from his breast-pocket, and was with difficulty rescued from a watery grave.

‘As well let you go,’ said Reginald, with a bitterness of feeling which he could not repress; ‘small benefit you will ever be to myself, or anybody else, as far as I can see; I do not know that it would much signify if I were to accompany you. No, no, I don’t mean that either,’ he added after a pause; ‘it is weak, cowardly, to feel like that: a shabby return for my uncle’s kindness. Perhaps after all things are best thus; if the thing had been accepted, it might have interfered with my law work, no doubt it has done so: the hours I have squandered upon this folly might have brought me through another text-book or two; I will slave harder than ever at them now, if not for my own sake, yet for that of others. Even this poor old manuscript may be of some use hereafter; who knows? It shan’t go into the river at any rate, or the fire either.’

So exhorting himself, Reginald placed his literary achievement more securely in the pocket from which it had dropped, and resumed his way steadily homeward.

But Reginald had not yet exhausted his experience of human reverses, even for that day. As he entered their humble lodging he was met by the

landlady, a sympathising being as far as her domestic cares permitted, with a face which showed that something was wrong.

‘Oh! please, Sir, come up directly to your Mamma,’ said the woman; ‘she have been took all over so.’

‘Is she ill?’ asked Reginald, anxiously.

‘No, not that, Sir, but in such trouble; some bad news I fear, Sir. There was a boy came half-an-hour ago with one of those papers.’

‘A telegram!’ Reginald ascended the stairs three at a time as he uttered the word.

He found Mrs. Mansel distracted with a conflict of feelings. The despatch of which the landlady had spoken lay on the table beside her, dated from his uncle’s residence in the north of London; a couple of lines in pencil only, but significant enough: ‘Mr. Woodroffe has had a seizure; come at once; no time to be lost.’

The tears of unselfish sorrow sprung to Reginald’s eyes as he perused this; ‘Dear uncle Robert,’ he exclaimed; ‘dear uncle! Mother, are you ready? we must be off directly.’

Mrs. Mansel was an unready woman; and instead of arranging for an immediate start, had sat wring-

ing her hands in a transport of grief. Unquestionable that this had some genuine affection in it ; but as unquestionably was it alloyed with personal apprehension at the blow which thus threatened to deprive them of the scanty subsistence they at present enjoyed. Reginald had almost to force her into her room : even then, some minutes elapsed, while she hesitated as to the choice of a bonnet. Ingrained in the poor woman's heart, amid a good deal that was estimable, were the coquetries of a frivolous youth ; now some time past, but bequeathing its legacy of unreality even to maturer life !

At length her preparations were completed ; the tedious cab-drive, during which Mrs. Mansel sat sobbing and wringing her hands, much longing to communicate to her son the distress which lay uppermost in her mind, but restrained by the tacit rebuke of his truer nature, brought to an end ; and Mr. Woodroffe's door reached.

But it was too late. A return to consciousness had taken place during which the sick man enquired eagerly for those whom he had hoped to see by his bedside : but the only persons present there were the housekeeper who had dispatched the telegram,

and a medical attendant. A second and more severe attack followed, and the sufferer breathed his last a few minutes before the cab drove up to the house; the blinds of the drawing-room were being lowered as it did so.

Late in the evening Mrs. Mansel and her son returned to their own lodging; the lodging which, poor as it was, they dared not retain for a week longer. Even Reginald had been compelled to turn his thoughts to their new position, during the drive homewards. Easy enough indeed to state that; any terms of utter negation would do; if he had written down *£ s. d.* on paper and placed a nought under each, it would hardly have been too emphatic. Mr. Woodroffe had enjoyed a narrow life income, straitened still more by his generosity to his sister and nephew, but that was all; no savings, they had been out of the question; no insurance even, the life for years past had been uninsurable;—nothing. Give up their lodging? Yes, and Reginald's profession too; hopeless to think of prosecuting that now: not very hopeful, even when his uncle's allowance was forthcoming; but now that it was withdrawn!—Every nerve, every faculty must be employed in striving to win for Mrs. Mansel and himself, by any toil that

would produce a present return however scanty, their daily sustenance !

‘I am glad I was spared that further temptation,’ said Reginald to himself as he replaced in his desk the manuscript poem, wholly forgotten since the morning, and reflected for a moment that, had he accepted the living lately in his uncle’s gift, the suggestion of the work appearing at his own risk need not have been one to apologise for: ‘I am glad I was ; I might have yielded. Ah! well, it is quite past now ; quite out of my own decision ; and so best. God help my poor mother in this great strait !’

CHAPTER X.

THE Wednesday on which the circumstances just narrated took place was as sultry in Gower as poor Reginald had found it, or but for his pre-occupation ought to have found it, on his way to the London publishers. Over-sultry, for it broke up the weather again. When Alice Brereton appeared at the vicarage next morning equipped according to appointment for the drive to the Worm's Head, a cold wind, rising almost to a gale, had set in from the north, ominous of an ensuing down-pour.

Meanwhile a letter had arrived from Percy's cousin, Lennox Marriott, deferring the yachting visit to Gower for a few days; 'probably the first fine day next week.' So this synchronised well enough with the weather forecasts; and when a message had been dispatched to Helen Lindsay, whose family lived in the next parish, putting off the Worm's Head party until Lennox wrote again,

nothing remained but for Alice to return home at her leisure.

Of course Percy Delacombe volunteered his escort, and Alice accepted it, although with some embarrassment; an embarrassment so much at variance with her manner since Percy's return, that it requires half-a-dozen words to explain it.


The fact is, that things did not stand with Alice this morning as they had done forty-eight hours before. During the interval, love,—for she could not shut out from herself that she did love Percy with all her heart,—had insisted on a re-hearing of the theory which involved its own disappointment. Was it so certain that he 'thought' of Léonie; thought of her, that is, with the emotions represented to the female mind by that verb when its subject is of the masculine gender and its object of the feminine? Might she not have been over-hasty in arriving at this conclusion?

Again and again Alice recalled the words, the phrases, on which she had based it; and the more frequently she did so, the greater indications there appeared that she might have been too precipitate. With the whole passionateness of her nature, and

notwithstanding all attachment to Léonie, all her desire in the abstract that her adopted sister should meet with some one so worthy of her as Percy, Alice's heart leapt up in rebound as she arrived at this conclusion. The dawnings of a new life began to arise within her!

This being so, however, it followed that Alice had no longer at her command the surface manner which she had assumed, easily enough although masking a deep pain, while she believed that a hopeless barrier existed between her and Percy. Now that the obstacle was removed, the priceless treasure of his love at all events still attainable, Alice became herself again; conscious of her deep heart-secret; shrinking from its betrayal, in act or word, to one whom it might now possibly concern to know it!

Under these altered conditions, it was not, as we have said, without some embarrassment that Alice accepted Percy's escort; especially as Hatty discovered that her home avocations would prevent her accompanying them. No escape however presented itself; and as Alice could not tell her proposed companion the state of the case in express terms, they



started for the walk accordingly; following, at Percy's suggestion, a path, familiar to them in former times, which led by one of the numerous ruined castles of the peninsula.

Although the wind was chilly, there were occasional glimpses of sunshine, and the warmth of the recent summer weather still hung about in sheltered spots. One such presented itself as they followed the course of a green dingle, or 'combe' as they are termed in Gower, apparently by a phrase imported from the opposite shores of the channel, which ran in the direction of the dismantled building. The glen was not of sufficient size to be classed as scenery, but attractive enough notwithstanding; its folds of copse and underwood, principally oak, and here and there broken by spurs of the craggy limestone of the district, enclosing a succession of meadows, the herbage of which still retained its freshness in defiance of the recent heat; while the stream of clear water to which this was owing wound capriciously from side to side of the valley, as some inequality in the ground, or the curvature of the combe itself, diverted its line of progress.

A fair scene, and one not lost upon either of those

who were now traversing it. Alice was enthusiastic in her love for natural beauty, especially that in which she had been brought up ; and Percy, although of a different temperament, appreciated it when his interest was not more actively engaged elsewhere. At present, the features of the glen entered rather prominently into such discourse as passed between his companion and himself, at least, in the earlier portion of their walk. To tell the exact truth, Percy was rather tongue-tied ; and feeling it incumbent upon him to say something, culled such topics of conversation out of the external surroundings of the position as thought fit to suggest themselves : when these failed, he relapsed into silence. Alice was shy and reticent too ; although, woman-like, she was the first to apply a remedy to the awkwardness of their *tête-à-tête*.

‘You expect to like your profession ?’ she asked.

‘That I do, Miss Brereton,’ said Percy, whose thoughts turned only too delightedly into the channel thus opened to them ; ‘it’s uphill work for a fellow, even when he has some interest to back him, and we have hardly any ; my father does all he can, but it is very difficult to get a ship at all. I should like one

of the new build, but I am afraid that is quite hopeless ; every one is trying for them.'

'What new build?' asked Alice ; 'do you mean the ironclads?'

'They are all that now,' said Percy, 'or nearly all ; the poor old timber-sides have no chance. No, I meant one of the turret-ships ; the new invention, you know, with a revolving turret for the guns ; it's a special service, and any man who got into it would be certain of doing well. But that's just the difficulty ; it is so popular that nothing but a first-rate connection is the least use.'

'I don't think I could bear to be a sailor,' said Alice. 'I am afraid of the sea ; it seems so restless, so cruel.'

'It is cruel,' replied Percy ; 'it was only the other day I was reading what the annual loss of life at sea is ; three or four thousand every year, in the English merchant service only.'

'Yes,' said Alice ; 'like one of those monsters in mythology, is it not ; always craving, and only appeased by a yearly tribute of victims ? But what I meant was more something in the sea itself ; its unrestfulness : it is such constant motion, and so

undisciplined, quite different to other things in nature: a sort of rebel against authority, as if it could not and would not be quiet. It frightens me.'

'You used not to think like that,' said Percy; 'you were always so fond of being down on the beach.'

'Yes,' answered Alice, 'but it seems all changed since that time: not really of course, but in one's own feelings. I cannot sit and watch the boats, and the waves coming in, as I used to do, looking at them but not thinking about them or anything else. I think of so many things, and I grow so weary in doing it.'

'What things?' asked Percy.

Alice mused for a minute. 'Myself, principally,' she then said.

'That I am quite sure you do not,' said Percy; 'you never did that in all your life, and never will.'

'I am sorry to say that I do,' answered Alice, 'very often indeed, and rarely to any good purpose; just in a dreamy sort of way; wondering what would have happened if one had done this thing or had not done that; wondering about things altogether.'

One's life, even a routine every-day life like mine, seems so very awful. It is like playing on the keys of some piece of mechanism ; you touch them easily and lightly enough, but all the time, out of one's sight and hearing, they are producing such tremendous effects.'

'I wish I could feel like that,' said Percy, 'it would make a better fellow of me perhaps. Although I am sure I don't know either,' he added, 'there are plenty of chances already ; if one gets careless and does wrong things, it isn't from not knowing how responsible it all is.'

'No,' said Alice sadly. 'But I did not mean anything so solemn as that ; I should not dare to talk of it. I was thinking of something far short of that ; merely of the present . . . of life as it is, I mean ; what extraordinary results, if you work them out, follow from little, trivial things which you were hardly conscious of when you did them. It is like talking ; if you stop in the middle of a conversation and take it back, piece by piece, to the point from which it started, how strangely the subjects have grown out of each other ; people often notice this. And it seems to me that one's actions go on growing

and multiplying in the same way, only it is so much more frightening.'

'I don't know that one should be afraid,' said Percy: 'you can't help it, whatever happens.'

'Yes, but then one can,' said Alice: 'that is what is so terrifying; you could forbear setting the stone rolling, and if you knew the consequences of it you would do so very often. It often haunts me, the fear of that, and more than a fear; the sort of feeling that something very dark and terrible will happen of which I shall have been the cause. But I did not mean to have teased you with my foolish fancies,' Alice added; then, checking the disclaimer which was rising to her companion's lips, she went on, 'Let us talk of something else; of yourself especially. You were speaking of your chance of getting one of the new ships.'

Percy was easily led back to the subject from which they had diverged and found plenty to say about it, his embarrassment in Alice's society again disappearing under the associations of this familiar topic.

So they walked on, side by side, Percy talking and Alice listening; talking and listening, as he and she

had done those years before, when they sat together on the sea-beach.

Neither of them, as yet, greatly altered ; no line of palpable demarcation yet drawn between that old time and the present. Alice somewhat sadder than formerly, but with little else of perceptible change about her. Percy, with the boy-heart still fresh in him, notwithstanding his twenty-two years ; the latter showing themselves mainly in a self-deprecating, humbled manner which had grown upon him lately, and which contrasted pleasantly enough with his usual animation.

Leisurely as their pace had been, however, the walk through the combe came to an end ; and the foot-path, following a slight rise in the ground, placed them in the immediate vicinity of the ruined castle. Little now remained of this in proportion to its former size ; the stone had been largely used in the construction of some neighbouring farm-houses ; and the square central keep, with a detached gateway at the foot of the steep rock on which the latter stood, composed the principal features still visible.

‘ One more clamber up the turret-staircase,’ said

Percy, as he ascended the winding path to the keep :
' I set my heart upon it in coming here.'

Alice assented, and the turret, which was of no great height, was scaled accordingly. Then they wandered in and out of the dismantled rooms on the basement, pointing out to each other the spots identified in recollection with some childish sport or interest which they had shared there.

But the occupation had something of melancholy about it; the memories thus revived were more sombre in character than those which had suggested themselves during their walk to the ruin. Percy was not talking now, eagerly discussing his fears and hopes in the future, as he had then been : neither of them were talking. When any familiar object presented itself, it was indicated by one or the other, and then the conversation dropped again ; without design or consciousness of their own, a strangeness of separation seemed to have grown up between them. The place too where they stood had none of the exceptional brightness which they had enjoyed in traversing the combe-path. The sun still shone in the centre court, but its light only gave an additional character of sadness to the mouldering

remains which surrounded it; the air too was chilling even in the sunshine, the exposed situation giving free scope to the cold wind which had set in, and which rustled mournfully in the clustering masses of ivy on the outside.

Their employment, accordingly, which under more auspicious circumstances might have been protracted for a much longer period, came to an end by a kind of tacit mutual consent. They descended from the keep again almost in silence.

As they did so, the wind, which had been rising for some time past, swept by them in a wild gust; while, nearly at the same instant, an unexpected turn in the path brought them immediately beneath the Norman gateway at the foot of the declivity, the massive frontage of which threw a heavily-marked line on the green-sward, contrasting vividly with the still bright sunshine beyond.

Alice and Percy both involuntarily paused, the former shuddering, and drawing her cloak more closely round her.


Once again the dark pall was over them. Once again its gloom was deepened by the advancing shadow of the alastor-wing!

* * * * *

Alice Brereton and her present escort were not the only visitors whom inclination or chance had brought to the spot that forenoon. As they emerged from the gateway, Percy still proposing to give Alice his escort as far as Ceniarth, they were surprised by finding on the outside another person also bound there; Mrs. Ponsonby.

Mrs. Ponsonby, however, it would seem, had been in no hurry to return home. No such hurry, at any rate, as was incompatible with her having been for some time stationary outside the gateway, watching the movements of the two figures whom, on her approach by a different route, she had seen ascending the path to the keep, and whom she had at once identified.

Not that Mrs. Ponsonby had any special object in maintaining this scrutiny. She was aware of Percy's return to the vicarage, as well as of Alice's having joined him and Hatty there in the morning; and if the projected drive to Rhosilly was put off, as Mrs. Ponsonby conjectured it was, nothing was more natural than that he should accompany Alice home, and that they should take the ruin in their way. Still, she did watch; it was her nature to do



so, even when, as in the present case, nothing was likely to come of it.

Nor, apparently did anything now come of it. Nothing could be more easy and natural, less like flirtation or any other proceeding which could suggest an opening for cavil, than the demeanour of the two persons she was observing. Little could she, or they, have foreseen the fruit which her *espionage* eventually did bear. How the germ of an idea, then presenting itself in embryo only, and only to be rejected as of small intrinsic probability, and small moment to Mrs. Ponsonby herself, whether probable or not, would yet never be wholly lost sight of by her ; would recur again under altered circumstances ; develop into maturity and conviction !

Alas ! how fatally !

Meanwhile there was no escape from Mrs. Ponsonby's society in the present. The two ladies walked together to the house, Percy accompanying them as far as the door in a state of considerable discontent, and then taking his leave. Alice, who had as much seclusion as she could desire at all times, soon found herself alone, and busied in reflection on the incidents of the forenoon.

Not indeed that she had deliberately proposed to herself any such employment of her time ; quite the contrary. Alice went upstairs to read ; to paint,— she was an artist in water-colours after a fashion ;— to pursue some one of half-a-dozen different avocations for which the materials existed in her own room ; she had not decided which of them, but, unquestionably, some one.

Very perversely, however, the avenues of these usually facile resources seemed now all closed against her : one after the other declined to respond to her approach ; there was a fatality against them all. Alice read. Prose first of all, until she discovered in herself some uncertainty as to whether it was not verse. Then, undoubted poetry ; there were the lines. But, after a few minutes, this began in its turn to read like prose. Art came next, and shared a similar fate ; the pencils cut away to inanition, the colours ran into each other on the palette, the outlines of the drawing went awry, and the lights all fell in the wrong place. Work ; embroidery ; illuminating ; all tried with corresponding results. At length, Alice came back to a book ; and after spending ten minutes in the perusal of as many

lines, finally gave up the attempt as hopeless, and allowed reflection its free course.

A pleasant course enough, as any one who had watched Alice's face would have seen. She would not analyse her own feelings, still less speculate upon those of her late companion; she would not have been herself had she done so. But she did not refuse to dwell on the companionship; to recall the incidents of the walk home, Percy's words and looks, the happiness of their having stood side by side together, shared the same thoughts, the same scenes;—to recall this in the past; possibly even, in some undefined region of thought, to reach forward with a tremulous, throbbing hope, to the future!

Who can tell?

Who would wish to scrutinise too closely the workings of a loveable woman's heart; one, which in its very capacity for so winning love, evolves the elements of its own deepest suffering?

Suffering? Yes, alas!

Even as Alice mused, the brightness was suddenly overcast. There was a knock at the door, and a servant entered.

A letter from Léonie. Alice tore it open with eager haste, forgetting for a moment the subjects with which her own thoughts had been so busily occupied.

Léonie's letter was a long and highly characteristic one, but as our space is limited, we must forego the pleasure, or, it may be, spare our readers the infliction, of perusing it. The writer excused herself, as she best might, for her tardiness as a correspondent; possessed Alice of a complete state of facts as to Miss Lester's health, but without any reference to the will episode; delivered a vehement diatribe against the government for their treatment of some ex-official whose cause the young lady had espoused; and then forthwith launched into the consideration of certain articles of wearing apparel, the antecedents of which, as being already well-known to Alice, secured her sympathy for the details of their present fortunes and transformations. To Léonie herself the topic was one of absorbing interest. Her genius lay in that direction, amongst others of undoubted utility; besides which, Sir Edgar's allowance, liberal as it was, underwent such large and early deductions for Léonie's presents

to other people, that in the intervals between quarter-days she was usually herself in extremities, and had to work hard accordingly. On the present occasion, the mantua-making seemed to have prospered.

‘My bonnet,’ Léonie wrote, ‘is a most successful composition: Aunt advised me to put in black lace down the strings, and it is such an improvement! I have worn my black silk, and white and black body and blue ribbons (last night blue sash too) every evening; and the black silk looks so distingué! To-night there is a small tea-party here, Aunt insisting on the dissipation; so I shall wear my white skirt and blue top, which (the white, I mean) has been done up very nicely.’

We must not however pursue these less material extracts further; although it may be added that the white skirt led Léonie by an easy transition to the sorrows and anxieties connected with a lilac garment falling under the same category; while from the purview of these latter, she passed, somewhat more abruptly, to the ecclesiastical status of Bayswater, supplementing her notices on that head with some remarks on the Church affairs of the country gene-

rally, and, ultimately, with an indignant defence of the colonial episcopate against its traducers.


These matters despatched, Léonie brought her epistle to a close. That is to say, she signed her name at the end with the usual endearing formulæ of her age and sex. But the end had no finality in it, for all that: for Léonie added a postscript: added two, in fact. The text of these we think it desirable to give at length.

‘P.S.—Alice, do you know? No, you don’t know unless I tell you; how should you? And I never can tell you; at least, I don’t see how I ever can. “Alice?” “Yes, Léonie, petite fille,” I know you would say if you were here, and I was, I mean, were . . . no, that can’t be right; may the conjunctive mood be desolée! “Alice?” “Yes, dear.” It is exactly eight days ago now; at least, it will be at half-past seven to-night; and I have been thinking so much of him ever since! Dear fellow! Alice, isn’t that a confession? and for me to make too, who have always laughed so at anybody who thought that somebody was different from everybody else. I don’t mean that he is different; he is just like at least two hundred people that one meets every day; and

he is not in the least handsome, and I don't believe he cares for me one bit ; why should he ? It was a small tea-party, you must know ; Aunt made me go ; a sort of dissolute Dorcas ; they're such kind people, I mean really kind, helping all sorts of helpless, feckless creatures who have never had anything but a hard word thrown at them all their lives, until the Misses Lithgow came into the parish ; and now it's so nice ; they've the mothers' meeting every fortnight with a small supper after it, and then they thought somehow they had only got the good mothers, and they started another entertainment for the bad ones ; they wouldn't let me come, so that was not the occasion. Don't you know why I have written all this, which has nothing to do with it, you inquisitive Alice ? Of course you do ; it is because . . . because . . . because I am afraid of the next question : what is his name ? Oh ! but you know it, *ma chère sœur* ; Percy Delacombe, Hatty's brother, you know. I remember him when I was in short frocks and he had just got into tail-coats, and of course he never noticed such a brat, any more than he does now ; but you and he must have been children together ; he has not been at home since I

don't know when ; but of course you know all about that. Alice, darling, I am a very weak, silly little girl ; can you ever forgive me ? Only one evening ; and I saw nothing of him really ; only we had some good laughs together, and I have had so little laughing here, and don't get much at Ceniarth. Papa is grave, and you are grave, you dear old Alice, and Hatty is grave. You don't know how often I have run out to the bridge there and had a fit of it all alone by myself, to carry off the propensity ; nobody could hear there, with the stream running underneath. But the bridge was dull company, after all ; his was so different. That was what made me think about him, I suppose, having somebody like oneself, somebody that one could have a good merry chat with. Good-night, Alice dear (for I am finishing this upstairs), don't be cross with your stupid sister ; and if he ever talks about her, which I am quite sure he will not, don't tell him what a little goose she is. Good-night.

‘P.S. No. 2.—Alice dear, has anything of this kind ever happened to you ? I wish I knew ; you could understand me better if it had. I know you will try to, even as it is, but I don't see how you



can. And *please* don't tell me I am impetuous about this, and that I have not had time to understand my own mind yet ; one knows so much more about oneself than anybody else can. At any rate, whatever you think of me, I trust you with my secret, dearest, with my whole heart. I know you will not betray me.—LÉONIE.'

Line upon line, sentence upon sentence, Alice perused the foregoing note and its postscripts ; read the latter twice over ; read them neither hurriedly nor with any acted slowness ; read them, as the writer, in her girlish heart, meant they should be read, in the sympathy of a deep love, identifying itself with all that Léonie had said and left unsaid ; read them from the first word to the very last ; pressed her lips fondly on the fair girl's name at its close.

Then, Alice locked the letter in her desk ; hurriedly made her toilet, very different in its haste and unconcern to the leisurely perusal she had given Léonie's note, and retired to what should have been sleep.

Towards day-break, it was sleep. Wearied out with their grief, the heart and brain succumbed to a leaden weight which oppressed both, and forced

them for the time into unconsciousness. But for hour after hour of the weary night which preceded daybreak Alice had lain with every faculty strung to the wakefulness of a deep misery.

Too deep even for tears, at first; nothing but a dull, barren feeling of desolation. But, by-and-by, her thoughts recurred to the morning's walk, to the dream which for the first time that day she had allowed herself to think might be realised, and yet which that day had crushed to the ground so finally and hopelessly. And as the conflicting images thus presented met in sharp contrast, the tears came too; hot tears of bitter, human anguish, such as, in this rough world, are so often wrung from those least worthy to shed them, while the authors of its crime and sadness pass through it with sere eyeballs!

But with the tears came also the firm resolve; antagonistic to any weakness which they might import in act.

‘I trust you with my secret; trust you with my whole heart; I know you will not betray me.’ So had Léonie written; and so Alice reiterated the words; plighting in more than one audibly regis-

tered vow, what from that nature needed no plighting, that the secret should be kept, the trust held sacred, the suspicion of betrayal abhorred as the deadliest of sins !

Plighting ; promising ; sealing lip and heart to this. Even with the half-questioning doubt, incapable of entire repression, but stifled in every instant of its attempted development into express thought, whether the sentiment which thus claimed sanctuary, as it were, in the very shrine and tabernacle of a life's devotion, was one of passing regard only ; or was indeed the echo of a soul-enthraling love !

CHAPTER XI.

‘THE first fine day next week,’ was the date which Lennox Marriott had assigned for his yachting trip to Gower in the letter referred to a few pages back. But the next week passed, and brought no fine day; not even the feasibility of one. Rain from the north-west, rain from the south-east; rain diagonal and rain vertical; drenching rain; drizzle; thunder-showers; every variety of the visitation, but still in some shape, rain. And the same the week afterwards; the earlier part of it, at least.

About Thursday, however, the weather showed symptoms of clearing. On Saturday, one of the latter days in August, it became settled fair; and on the morning following, Lennox wrote to say that he and Charley Roper would run across on Monday without fail.

So the Rhosilly drive was re-organised; Helen Lindsay and Alice certified of the fact after morning church; and arrangements made, with no fear of

contradiction from the weather this time, for an early start after breakfast the following morning.

An exquisite morning it proved. Not looking perhaps so settled as the glass had guaranteed forty-eight hours before, but still, in its inception, cloudless and lustrous; deriving additional beauty from the causes which to a practised eye might have portended change, but which to the party who drove out of the vicarage gate only augmented the charm of the scenery, defining the rocky headlands of the coast and the distant background of mountain with almost magical clearness, while at the same time it bathed them in the warm light which gives to surrounding objects at once realisation in feature and ideal depth in expression.

The start was as approximately early as could be expected when of the four occupants of the pony-chaise three were young ladies. Rhosilly bay, at any rate, was reached sufficiently near the proposed hour to allow of the Worm's Head being visited without risk of detention there from the tide rising between it and the mainland; a danger which at times required to be guarded against.

On their way to the village, little took place.

Hatty insisted upon taking the reins herself, alleging that Percy, as a sailor, was presumably incompetent. Helen Lindsay she placed by her own side; and relegated Percy and Alice to the back seat. What ulterior views Hatty had in this we need not inquire; whatever they were, they led to no results. The pace was quite rapid enough and the cross-roads quite stony enough to have secured to those in the rear the utmost privacy of discussion, had it been wished; but that which in fact took place might have been printed in the county newspaper!

The most routine chat upon the most ordinary and obvious of subjects. Alice seemed bent upon confining herself and her companion to this; and had Mr. Burrows been in Percy's place, might have induced that judge of character to reconsider the depreciatory estimate he had formed of her power for small-talk. It was in vain that Percy laboured to strike some chord of mutual feeling between them; topic after topic, as it promised to lead to this, was either allowed to drop by Alice, or responded to by her with some light remark which was still more mortifying.

All the more so, because this was by no means the first time during the last two or three weeks in which Percy's reasonable expectations had been thus frustrated. On the contrary, it formed the climax and culminating point, as it were, of Alice's altered manner to him during that period; the alteration dating, as the reader will easily understand, from the day when they walked home together by the castle. Since that walk, in fact, Alice had rarely been at the vicarage: when she was there, she spoke in the light, off-hand manner, as nearly approaching to heartlessness as anything in Alice could do so, which she had adopted on Percy's first return home; ice-barriers seemed to have grown up between them again.

What was the reason of this change? Percy asked himself; dislike; offence? No, that was impossible: it did not wear that character. But what then?

Percy knew not; he could not tell; could not divine in any way. He had talked with Hatty, but she was puzzled also. One thing only seemed clear to both of them, that it augured amiss for Percy's hopes.


Yes: it did.

To what extent, if at all, Percy was prepared to return her own love was a question which, until Léonie's letter came, Alice had never considered; she would have shrunk from doing so, until he gave her the right; whatever vague, half-happy, half-wondering surmise had gathered round her mind, it was not entertained in any objective shape. But that letter had changed all; for Léonie's sake she must be vigilant now, must carefully note any indications of the kind: avoid his society as far as possible, but, when unavoidably thrown with him, be on the watch for this; repel this with all her force.

And so she did.

Hoping at first, thinking it still possible, that her surmise might be disproved; that her original belief of his caring for Léonie would turn out to be the correct one;—half the burden would be lifted from her heart then!

Ah! but it might not be. Now that Alice set herself expressly to ascertain Percy's state of feeling, it became obvious enough; suspicion ripened into certainty; look, voice, gesture betrayed the fact twenty times an hour; whenever and wherever they



were together. Yes, indeed; she had to be the icicle now for which Mr. Langridge had taken her! to repel; to chill; even, as on this drive to Rhosilly, to *mortify*! Had her affection for Léonie not compelled this, her trust would; it must be done at whatever cost.

Cost to herself? Yes indeed, but let her not think of that; it was cost to him too, poor fellow; her heart bled for him in exacting it; and yet, it must be done. Happily, the wound, in his case, could not be a very deep one; whatever he felt was of recent growth; he would join his ship, or go back to London, very likely; perhaps meet Léonie there; perhaps . . . Ah! she could not think of that! Let her not think at all, but go through with her own plain duty. One more sorrow to be borne with her to the grave, doubtless; and such a sorrow; one which tore heart and fibre in its endurance! But perhaps it would not have to be borne very long!

Such, in substance, had been the course which Alice had sketched out for herself; and, as we have seen, she had acted upon it. The present excursion she had fought hard to escape; but Hatty had been urgent for her to join in it, and Alice could neither

explain her reasons for declining to do so, nor decline without reason.

But it was a torturing day.

The torture of that wretched drive ; of the mask of indifference, of superficial light chit-chat, which she had to wear throughout it ; the words which all but leapt forth into day, clamouring to be heard, thrust back only by main force, with ashen and trembling lips !

Then, the still worse torture when, on leaving Rhosilly, Alice, with the view of frustrating what she guessed would be Hatty's arrangement for their walk, persistently attached herself to the latter, and thus compelled Percy to take charge of Helen Lindsay ! The look of disappointment with which he did so ; replaced indeed, in the next instant, by a pleasant smile for his companion, but sending to Alice's heart while it lasted a pang of untold anguish !

And then, worst of all, what occurred on their walk from the village to the immediate object of their visit, the Worm's Head ! To make this and some subsequent matters intelligible, a short sketch of the localities is here necessary.

The singular promontory thus named forms the

western extremity of Gower, projecting into the Bristol Channel, and breasting, without however in any way lessening, the force of its waves, which after dashing against the headland, beat into Rhosilly bay in its rear with a violence which has long made the latter the terror of mariners. 'Worm,' in this nomenclature, means, snake; and the jutting rock, connected with the shore by a reef covered by the sea at low water, but from which it slants up itself into a scarp of three hundred feet high, may well suggest the likeness to those who approach it from the mouth of the Channel. It should be added,—for we must not dwell over-long on this chorography,—that the Head consists of two distinct cliffs. The approach to the nearer, although rough, is free from other difficulty. The farther, and far loftier point, on the other hand, involves in the access to it something of a *mauvais pas*; sufficiently such to alarm the inexperienced. The neck of rock connecting it at low water with the nearer island is rent almost from side to side by a deep chasm or fissure, produced by the action of the sea; and for two or three paces a giddy head feels itself in no little jeopardy.

On the present occasion, although no accident

occurred, the passage of this chasm imposed upon Alice a task of even greater severity than any she had yet undergone. On nearing the point, Helen Lindsay, who, as the reader may recollect, was a young lady of vivacious character, brushed past Alice and Hatty in the narrow causeway with some peril to both, and clearing the fissure at a bound, sped with equal activity up the slope of turf and rock which led to the summit of the Head.

Hatty's turn came next; the party had moved in single file, and she had taken the lead. But Hatty did not at all like the adventure. She was as good as gold, but she had no heart, except under the direst compulsion, for crossing a razor-edge of broken rock, with an arm of the sea at a very unpleasant depth below it on each side. So Hatty looked and looked; put one foot forward and then drew it back again; then repeated the process with the other foot, and finally declared it was impossible for her to cross. Alice first, and then Percy, scrambled past her, although more gently than Helen Lindsay had done, and stretched out hands to her assistance. But it was no use: Hatty made sundry hypocritical feints of accepting them, but hardly came

within arm's length each time; and eventually the attempt was given up in despair. Hatty protested that she should be thankful and happy to be permitted to stroll back to the near Head, and there await their return under the shade of the cliff; and as she was unmistakably in earnest, her two companions were compelled to allow this; and she retreated accordingly.

Alice's thoughts had been so much occupied with this miscarriage, that, for a minute or two, she failed to realise that she was herself left alone with Percy at the foot of the farther headland, Helen Lindsay having long since reached the summit, where she was concealed by some projecting rocks, while Hatty was rapidly disappearing in the opposite direction. Alice at once turned to follow her, murmuring some indistinct apology to her companion. But she was too late. Percy took her hand in one of his own, and detained her for a minute, very gently, but still so that she could not escape.

'Alice,' he said, looking wistfully into her face, 'dear Alice!'

It was all past now, all dissimulation, all concealment of the fact from herself; he had called her by

her Christian name, the first time since his return home; the words of avowal were trembling on his lips. And her own heart; oh! how rebellious that was; how it throbbed, almost to bursting: how it loved him; pleaded, in its agony, for him, for itself! Could she trust her resolution a moment longer?

No; indeed: she must act. Act, unkindly, cruelly perhaps, but decisively; so as to leave no error, no loop-hole for hope, for change!

With a sudden violence, foreign to her nature, almost fierce in its passionate haste, Alice drew, or rather wrenched her hand from the palm which still held it, and followed Hatty along the causeway, the clear olive complexion which Hatty had praised flushing as she did so with a heat which suffused temples and cheek alike. Percy gazed after her, bewildered no less than pained. Perhaps, as we are all human, some mortification at his summary rejection mingled with these feelings, tending eventually to allay their bitterness, although at the moment they rather augmented its intensity.

Be this as it may, he had no time to analyse his sensations. Helen Lindsay had become wearied of

occupying her look-out post alone, and was already sending exclamations of feminine entreaty after the rest of the party. 'Hat——tie!' 'Al——ice!' 'Mr. Dela——combe!' resounded from the height above, in a voice naturally musical, and which distance silvered into the tones with which a mermaid of the deep might upbraid some inconstant lover. It was of course impossible to leave Helen alone, even had her supplication been less urgent; so, with a rapid step, and a heart distressed by a conflict of emotions to which his utmost speed hardly gave vent, Percy mounted to her side.

'What have you done with your sister and Miss Brereton?' asked Helen.

'Hatty couldn't come,' answered Percy, 'and Miss Brereton . . . ' 'wouldn't,' he was about to add, but he substituted the words 'went back with her.'

'And they have left us to take care of each other, have they, Mr. Delacombe?' asked the young lady.

'It was not Hatty's fault, exactly,' said Percy, apologetically; 'she really did her best to get across that place, but she was too frightened.'

‘Just so,’ said Helen ; ‘and Alice, who never was frightened at anything except herself, and who has no idea of being herself at all when it is desirable she should be anybody else, went back to keep her company ! I wish I was a little more like either of them, and I have no doubt you echo the sentiment. But you see you must put up with me for the time being,’ added Helen, with a pretence of pouting, which intimated to Percy, as it was intended it should do, that the speaker had formed a strong opinion as to the direction in which his affections might be supposed to be engaged.

Percy groaned in spirit. He was longing for a quiet half-hour ; an interval of reflection, in which he might calmly balance, if indeed there were any balancing required in the matter, his chances of success or failure with Alice—after that morning’s experience ; above all, for an exhaustive discussion of them with Hatty.

But neither of these satisfactions were within his reach. On the contrary, he must do his best to make himself agreeable to the companion into whose society he was then thrown for the present, and who, it may be added, showed no intention of foregoing her

advantage. Coquette-like, or rather like all the daughters, who, to the great comfort and happiness of the ruder sex, have descended from our common mother, Helen bore a little, very little, malice against Percy, because his affections appeared to be engaged in another quarter. She fully approved of the quarter as such ; and, as regarded herself, had no personal feeling whatever in the matter, quite the contrary. As Hatty had divined, Helen Lindsay thought much more of Percy's cousin Lennox than of Percy himself. Probably this had something to do with Helen's alacrity in climbing the Worm's Head that morning ; for was it not the look-out point from which Lennox Marriott's yacht would be earliest descried on its approach from Tenby ?

Still, for all this, Helen could not forbear some teasing on the occasion ; all the more, because she saw that Percy was sufficiently pre-occupied to make him sensitive to it.

'Now then, please,' said Helen, 'we must come and watch.'

'Watch ?' echoed Percy, who for the moment had forgotten everything about his cousin ; forgotten most sublunary matters, excepting the scorn which

Alice Brereton had poured upon his half-spoken suit.

‘Yes, watch,’ said Helen, mimicking Percy’s somewhat absent tone: ‘I don’t mean like the Swansea police, or the coast-guard, or an Oxford proctor, or any of those martyrs to social self-defence. I only mean, keep our eyes open for the yacht, which I believe was the purpose for which we came here; you said they would hoist blue over red when they got near enough.’

‘All right,’ said Percy, feeling it incumbent upon him to shake off his melancholy; and perhaps deriving some assistance in doing so from the circumstance that Helen was quite as pretty as she was lively.

So he organised a seat for her among the broken rocks on the summit; and then threw himself, breast forward, on the turf, looking down over the scarped edge of the cliff.

‘That’s where the cavern is,’ said Percy, craning himself still further over the precipice to obtain a better view; ‘I fancy I see something like an arch, but perhaps it is only shadow. How low the tide has fallen to-day.’

‘Yes, I noticed that as we came along,’ said Helen; ‘the rocks between the two heads were quite uncovered.’

‘It is a spring-tide,’ said Percy; ‘it will come back like an avalanche: it is that which makes the bore in the channel here; the great tidal wave, I mean.’

‘I know,’ said Helen; ‘a weaker mind than mine would have made a bad pun, but, you see, I forbore. It’s dreadfully dangerous, is it not?’

‘Well,’ answered Percy, ‘it isn’t pleasant to encounter a wall of water sixty or eighty feet high, running up right across between the two shores. We might almost see the two wrecks in Rhosilly bay to-day,’ he continued, rising and looking in that direction.

‘What two wrecks?’ asked Helen.

‘The two old ones, the Spanish ship and the Bristol steamer; people say they still hold together. It is a frightful place there.’

‘It is a frightful thing being a sailor at all,’ said Helen. ‘How brave you must be, Mr. Delacombe.’

‘I hope I shouldn’t shirk my duty,’ said Percy,

‘but I have never been tried yet; we had very light weather on our cruise. Stick to one’s work and trust in Providence, that’s about what it comes to.’

‘Well, I suppose so,’ said Helen, ‘and I won’t make fun of that, although it does remind me of something which I always think is funny.’

‘What is that?’ asked Percy.

‘Why, that old song about the pilot: “Oh! pilot, ’tis a fearful night,” et cætera. If I had been the passenger, I shouldn’t have derived much comfort from that ancient mariner; at least, he takes rather an odd way of allaying her apprehensions.’

‘How so,’ asked Percy, who would sooner have faced a tornado than prolonged the dialogue with his lively companion, but was compelled to make some response, nevertheless.

‘Why,’ said Helen, ‘the pilot assures the said passenger, who apparently was highly nervous, and whom I therefore conclude to have been a young lady, that it was in a precisely similar night that various members of his own family had gone to the bottom. I have forgotten the exact words, but it is his father in one stanza, and I believe his uncle

in the next, and so on. It always seemed to me an original topic of consolation. What is the time, Mr. Delacombe, please?’

Percy took out his watch, and commenced an elaborate study of the dial-plate, Helen looking over his shoulder.

‘Oh! Mr. Delacombe,’ she exclaimed, ‘it never can be so late as that. Half-past five!’

‘No,’ said Percy, ‘that is what I was trying to calculate: but I have forgotten how the figures stood yesterday. It gains six minutes an hour, although the regulator is hard up to slow; and it’s so much trouble altering the hands that I let it go ahead till it works right again.’

‘Watches are odd things,’ said Helen, ‘and clocks too. Papa is always arranging ours to make them strike exactly together, and they never will, but come in like a Sunday-school class answering questions, the model pupil always right, and the others always a little bit out each way: then there is that irrepressible time-piece on the landing, which insists on getting five minutes ahead of everything, and then goes on quite steadily. It is character, I suppose. Can you form any conjecture

within two hours, do you think?' added Helen, observing that Percy still held his watch open, with a look of profound scrutiny, although in fact unconscious that he was doing so.

'I beg your pardon,' said Percy, colouring deeply; 'I was . . . that is . . . Oh! the time? yes; somewhere between twelve and one, it must be. We ought to be seeing the yacht,' he added, turning to look down the channel again; 'they have had a capital side wind all the morning, although it seems dying away now. Hallo!'

The yacht was nearer than Percy expected. As he spoke, a white sail flitted, almost like a bird, athwart the foot of the Worm's Head, the boat having made a long tack towards the Devonshire coast, where it was out of sight, and then run back while their attention was drawn in the opposite direction. Percy's shout was responded to by the two occupants of the yacht, and the latter then stood on for Rhosilly, where the party from the Worm's Head arrived soon afterwards, Alice and Hatty having been picked up on the way back.

'Now, Percy,' said Lennox Marriott, as soon as

they had interchanged greetings, 'I vote for something ; Charley and I have just settled it.'

'What is that ?' asked Percy.

'Why, that we three should do the cavern ; that old fellow under the Worm, I mean. Just look how the tide is down, and it's falling a dead calm ; we shall never have such a chance again.'

'It's risky, you know,' said Percy.

'Yes, I know it is, more or less,' answered Lennox, 'so we will not ask the young ladies to accompany us ; but it will be awfully jolly for us three ; here's a boat I've been looking at which will just do. You'll come, of course, Percy ?'

'Certainly,' said Percy, although with a heavy heart ; not on account of the possible hazard of the undertaking, but because he longed to be alone with Hatty, narrating and discussing the rebuff he had experienced that morning. There was no escape, however ; so Percy walked down to the beach with a good grace, the three girls arranging to drive home by themselves. He paused however for a few seconds as he stepped into the boat.

'By the way, Lennox,' he said

